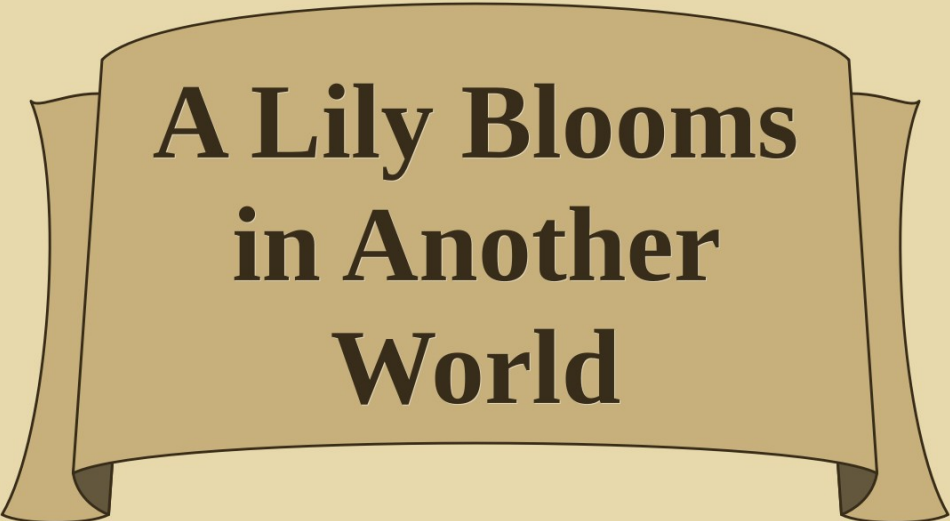




A Lily Blooms in Another World

Ameko Kaeruda

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A Lily Blooms in Another World

Author: Ameko Kaeruda
Illust.: Shio Sakura

A manga-style illustration of two young women standing in a field of large, pink and yellow lilies. The woman on the left has long, wavy brown hair with a large red bow, wearing a red dress with a white collar and a blue gem necklace. The woman on the right has long, dark hair with purple eyes, wearing a light purple dress with a white collar and a blue gem necklace. They are both looking towards the viewer with slight smiles. The background is filled with lilies and soft, glowing light. The title 'A Lily Blooms in Another World' is written in a stylized, golden font across the middle of the image.

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Miyako Florence

Fuuka Hamilton

Umi

Shan Li



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Prologue 1: The Day It Began and the Heroine

Her nineteenth birthday. The morning she reached the age when people could begin to ask her, “Are you still not married?” Miyako, the youngest daughter of a family of regional nobles, was called to see her fiancé Klaus, the eldest son of the Reinhardt family of high nobility. He had only one thing to tell her.

“I’ve decided to call off our engagement.”

From the beginning, it was an engagement across social classes. Miyako had no right to refuse him.

“Understood. I accept your order to cancel the engagement. I wish you a good day, Klaus-sama.”

In response to the one-sided declaration, Miyako deeply bowed her head, her auburn hair beautifully tied up. She then left the Reinhardt household.

Miyako felt the pitying stares of the servants all around her. Somebody’s voice whispered, “And he even turned down the count’s daughter to get engaged to her.” Without so much as raising a single eyebrow at that voice, Miyako climbed into the carriage waiting outside the mansion.

The carriage drove away, and drove and drove. When the Reinhardt house had left her sight, Miyako’s shoulders began to shake, and she screamed out.

“Yesssss!!! I’m free now!!!”

I’ve done it. I’ve done it!!

I got the engagement called off!!

I’m free now!!!

She pumped her fists with all her might.

As it happens, Miyako was someone who’d just wound up reincarnated in this world. This was *Drop Fantasia*, the otome game she once played religiously. Miyako’s student days when she got absorbed playing it were long over. In those days, Miyako played through every route in *Drop Fantasia*, wasting no time on sleep.

Years passed, and Miyako became a wage slave with no time to sleep once again. One night, after wearing herself down day after day, she fell asleep with the thought “I can’t do this anymore.” Miyako felt a pain in her chest, and the next morning she let out a scream. A scream of joy.

She had woken up as the seventeen-year-old main heroine in the world of *Drop Fantasia*.

Yahoo, three cheers for deus ex machina!

“Heh heh, now I can make the wild dream I’ve held for so many years come true.”

Miyako’s trademark hazel eyes lit up.

There was a character whose route Miyako was never able to clear, despite being so engrossed in *Drop Fantasia*. That character was also the first love to steal Miyako’s heart. Up to her current point in the game’s world, Miyako had striven to win over that character, that woman.

That’s right.

Miyako had worked to have the main hero, Klaus Reinhardt, break off their engagement.

“Driver!”

“Yes, what’s the matter, my lady?”

Miyako leaned out of the carriage window and called out to the man steering the horses. The cool morning breeze felt pleasant as it struck her cheeks, as though foretelling the heart-racing days around the corner.

“Change of course. Hurry to Fuuka Hamilton, the count’s daughter!”

Fuuka Hamilton was the count’s beautiful daughter in *Drop Fantasia*, who’d firmly captured Miyako’s heart—

“Fuuka-sama. I’ll make you happy no matter what!”

—and the main scenario’s villainess.

Prologue 2: The Villainess and the Day It Began

Fuuka Hamilton drank her morning tea.

Black tea.

The color filling the cup reminded her of the woman with the same color of reddish-brown hair, the woman who'd stolen everything from her.

All was going well until three years ago. Fuuka had a privileged family. She had a fiancé who was both close to her in age and handsome, though their marriage's only purpose was to further the family interests.

My life was all smooth sailing, if I do say so myself. I put in so much effort to live up to that.

What changed everything was *her* arrival. Miyako Florence. She possessed a healthy beauty that made her seem to shine from the inside out. She was outspoken and intelligent too. Fuuka could tell better than anyone that Miyako Florence was a catch.

"Fuuka, I want to make Miyako Florence my bride. Let's break off our engagement."

When her former fiancé Klaus Reinhardt said those words to her, Fuuka thought only one thing.

Ah, I knew it.

Fuuka hadn't been idle before that. Her family under Count Hamilton absolutely did not want to lose marital ties to the higher-class marquis's family. There were no sentimental feelings of love between her and Klaus. All that had lain before her was a sense of duty, a sense of how things ought to be. Fuuka had deployed every trick she could think of to keep Klaus Reinhardt by her side, even as Miyako slowly crept into his heart. Fuuka'd had to use some underhanded methods in order to live up to the expectations of the Hamilton family, who so badly wanted a connection to the Reinhardts.

But even so, or perhaps because of that, when Klaus told her of his selfish decision to end the engagement, she didn't feel frustrated or dejected. Instead, Fuuka accepted it. Somehow she had always known that it would turn out this way.

Yes, it's like my fate has already been decided.

"I need to stop thinking," she said with a sigh.

Fuuka delicately placed her cup onto its saucer.

“Now then, there’s a lot that must be done! I need to make Father take notice of me again.”

Now that her engagement into the marquis’s family was canceled, Fuuka’s father, the head of the Hamilton family, was incredibly disappointed in her. Not making any effort to hide his displeasure, he had thrown a wine bottle at her when she received notice of the break-off of her engagement. Fuuka’s father began busying himself with looking for partners for her younger sisters. He had completely given up on her, and there was no place in the Hamilton house for those who failed.

Even so, Fuuka continued to work hard. She not only memorized the methods of etiquette and balance of power in high society, but she also studied economics, commercial sciences, foreign languages, and white magic. Fuuka continued voraciously learning the so-called bridal training she needed to move forward in life, as well as the education necessary for a member of the nobility.

Father won’t take notice of me for a little while. Still, disgraced as I am by the canceled engagement, he lets me live the same lifestyle I always have. I can live in the same privileged environment.

Trying to cheer up, Fuuka told herself this.

“Now then, I suppose today I’ll try reading a classic from a neighboring country in its own language.”

Faltering was not permitted. She had to suppress the feelings threatening to rise up in her heart. Fuuka had to swallow back the almost delusional cries trying to pass through her lips.

And so, thinking things like this...

“I want to run away...”

Yes, I want to.

“To somewhere else.”

Wanting to run away to somewhere else. Hoping that a prince will turn up to take me to some faraway land. I mustn’t think things like that.

Fuuka scolded herself for letting her tightly clenched fists tremble and her head hang down.

At that moment, the door burst open. The person who came running in was impossible.

“Fuuka-sama!”

“Uh, ah, wh-what?! What’s going on?!”

The opening door caused the still air in the room to move. Wind blew in through the window, shaking Fuuka’s lustrous hair and dress.

“Y-You’re—”

Fuuka gasped. The one who’d run into her room was none other than Miyako Florence.

“Please, come with me!”

The one Klaus Reinhardt had taken a liking to, the woman who’d

stolen everything from her, was standing right there. Fuuka was dumbfounded.

Come with you? What in the world are you talking about?

Fuuka was at a complete loss for words. She heard the servants' voices in the distance, flustered at the unexpected (and extremely discourteous) arrival of this guest. At this point, Fuuka knew she should act like a lady of the proud Hamilton family and issue a swift warning about such an entrance and this complete lack of etiquette.

The woman with gleaming eyes in front of her was supposed to be her hated rival in love.

So there's no way I can take this hand, this outstretched hand...

This woman, with her brown hair swaying in the morning breeze, knelt down and took Fuuka's hand, just like a prince on a white horse. The once-upon-a-time rival kneeling in front of her gazed up at Fuuka, paying no mind to her fine dress pooling on the floor.

"Fuuka-sama, I have always longed for you."

Ah, there's no way that I, Fuuka Hamilton of the proud Hamilton family, could take this hand. And yet...



Inside the carriage, Miyako could not help humming to herself.

What a wonderful birthday this is. The bright clear sky, the pleasant breeze, the gently rocking carriage. Most of all, the villainess whom I've been burning for all these years, Fuuka, is sitting next to me.

"Hey, Fuuka-sama."

"I'd like you to drop the pretense and stop calling me 'Fuuka-sama.'"

"Whoa, so forward!"

"What are you talking about? First you steal my fiancé, then you kidnap me. I think it's a bit late to be addressing me with 'sama.'"

"Eh, uhm. Well... Fuuka-chan?"

"You're acting very familiar, now aren't you?! Well, whatever. What is it?"

"Heh heh. I just felt like trying that out."

"I *will* kick you, you know that, right?"

Eyes rimmed with perfect lashes glared at her, and Miyako calmed down.

Oh, so cute! Cutest of all is that she's glaring at me, but I'm still holding her hand over her knee, and she's not shaking it free.

Miyako clenched down on Fuuka's cool hand.

"What is it?"

"Oh, it's just, I'm so happy."

"Do you have any brains at all between your ears?"

Ah, I love your sharp comebacks too!

Knowing she shouldn't make Fuuka *too* angry, Miyako grew quiet again. They sat in silence for a while.

"...Miyako."

"What's up?!" responded Miyako, eyes sparkling at the mention of her name.

If Miyako had a tail, she would have been wagging it. She didn't go as far as panting excitedly, but acting so happy at just having her name called took a certain kind of talent.

Incidentally, when Miyako took a "What animal are you?" quiz in the real world, the result was "dog." Although, she herself had forgotten this.

"What was that before?"

"Hm? What was what?"

"Well, *that*, what was it?"

"I don't know which 'that' you're talking about."

"Oh, for goodness' sake! When you said you longed for me, or something like that!"

“Oh!” said Miyako. “That was me confessing to you.”

“There’s something fundamentally wrong with your head. Would you like me to introduce you to a doctor?”

“It’s just that, the more I learned about you, Fuuka-chan, the more I fell in love.”

“With me?”

“Yeah,” Miyako said with a nod.

In the main route in this otome game, Fuuka ended up leading a life of defeat as the villainess. But the moment Miyako laid eyes on Fuuka’s character information sheet, she fell in love.

“Like how you have a strong sense of responsibility, or how you always work so hard. And how even though you’re not a morning person, you wake up early to study. And you’re amazing at white magic!” said Miyako, counting off Fuuka’s good points on her fingers. “You act like you don’t know anything when you’re in front of Klaus, but in reality you’re super knowledgeable.”

In the world of *Drop Fantasia*, though, these traits were all used against the main heroine.

“And you put in effort to get your father to notice you.”

“H-Hold on! Hold on a second!!!”

“Hm?”

“How do you know that...?”

Miyako noticed Fuuka’s creeped-out expression. Specifically, she looked at Miyako as if she were looking at a stalker.

“I must have temporarily lost my mind, coming with you.”

“Fwah?! Wait a minute, it’s not like that!”

Oops. I said too much.

Miyako shut her mouth in a hurry.

That was information somebody living in this world shouldn’t know.

I messed up. Now that it’s come to this, I’ll have to tell Fuuka my secret.

“Um, the truth is... I can see the future.”

“What?” Fuuka widened her eyes.

As a player of this otome game, Miyako knew the future of this world. It was equivalent to having the power to predict the future. Well, at least as far as she’d gotten to see through the game’s scenarios.

“Maybe not ‘see the future,’ exactly, but like, clairvoyance? Something like that anyway. With that power, I ‘saw’ you.”

“...How much did you see?”

“Everything, I think.”

She saw Fuuka being cruelly scolded by her father Count Hamilton after the engagement was called off; her being cast away by

him, the father she loved and respected; her persevering with hard work despite all that.

These are all things that Miyako learned from “Villainess Fuuka’s Secret Backstory,” posted on one of the game designers’ blogs.

But looking at all that only deepened my feelings for Fuuka.

“You can’t expect me to believe that; it’s like something out of a fairy tale. Besides, if you know that much about me, then why did you go and steal my fiancé from me?”

“Well...”

That was also something Miyako learned from the game’s scenarios. If Miyako doesn’t get engaged to Klaus—in other words, in the event that Fuuka’s engagement isn’t called off, and she manages to marry into the prestigious Reinhardt family—Fuuka dies gruesomely in a sudden accident halfway through their honeymoon.

On the other hand, if Miyako marries Klaus, deploring herself for failing to bring good news to the Hamilton family, Fuuka chooses to take her own life on their wedding night.

Horrible. No normal person could come up with those scenarios. They treat the villainess way too mercilessly.

Miyako wondered why it had to be that way, but whichever route she chose, the result was the same. With no other option to change that outcome, Miyako followed the otome game’s predetermined route and became engaged to Klaus—then induced him to break off the engagement.

Even while she was playing *Drop Fantasia*, she’d been infatuated with the courageous, hardworking, beautiful villainess. Once she met the real-life Fuuka as rivals contending for the role of bride to a noble house, she realized her charm was the real thing, and that she was far, far more charming than the in-game Fuuka. Miyako knew no one could stop her love for Fuuka. She swore to make Fuuka happy, no matter what.

When Miyako led Klaus into canceling their engagement, she had employed a plethora of tricks with her knowledge of the game, but that is a story for another time...

“No matter what reason they had, I could never forgive the man who threw you away so unfairly, or the family who treated you so poorly.”

“Don’t talk so ill of Klaus-sama and my father. All of it was due to my inadequacy.”

“There’s nothing inadequate about you! ...Sorry, but that’s what I really think.”

Miyako took Fuuka’s hand once again.

She pulled out a hidden bouquet of roses and presented them to her beloved Fuuka.

What she really wanted to give to Fuuka was a white lily to go with her lustrous black hair, but it seemed that the people of this world hadn't managed to cultivate lilies.

Miyako fixed her shining hazel eyes in a gaze aimed at the dignified, beautiful girl.

"I, Miyako Florence, swear that I will do everything I can to make you happy!"

At that declaration, Fuuka's violet eyes opened wide in surprise.

Her cheeks instantly began to redden. Steam was practically rising from her ears. After all, this was the very first time in Fuuka's entire life that she'd had affection expressed to her like this. Moreover, that person was the same gender as her and the former rival who'd stolen everything from her.

Fuuka felt flustered.

Despite everything, why is my heart starting to beat so fast?

"...Happy."

"Yeah, let's be happy together!"

"But, somebody like me..." started Fuuka, her voice trembling.

I lost my engagement. I failed to contribute to the elevation of the great family of Count Hamilton. I don't deserve to be happy.

Fuuka softly hugged the bouquet that had been foisted on her. The tender smell of the roses tickled her nostrils.

And then—

And then, Fuuka slowly shook her head.

"I can't. I'm the eldest daughter of the venerable family of Count Hamilton. I can't just throw away my family..."

"But, but is the Hamilton family going to make you happy?"

"What?!"

All the days of belittlement flashed before her eyes.

Miyako is right.

In that house, Fuuka was just a pawn for political marriage.

But even so—

"You have two weeks."

"Huh?"

"I have no doubt that it won't take more than two weeks for riders from the Hamilton family to find me," Fuuka said deliberately.

"Within those two weeks, try to make me say the words 'I'm happy.'"

Miyako's hazel eyes popped open. Two weeks. In other words, fourteen days. She had to make Fuuka happy within that time limit.

"...Absolutely!" shouted Miyako. Her voice was overflowing with joy.

After all. After all, that means that for two weeks, she won't reject me. Oh my God, what?! I actually have a chance at this!!!

"Yahooooo!!!"

Miyako leapt up in jubilation.

On that pleasant morning, as the carriage drove along, Miyako's shouts of joy echoed across the sky.

"By the way, where is this carriage heading?" asked Fuuka, her glossy black hair fluttering in the wind coming through the carriage window.

"Oh, sorry, Fuuka-chan. I should have said," responded Miyako, watching the scenery flash past outside the window. "We're headed for my homeland."

"...What?"

"Which is, by the way, the Atika region."

"What?!?!" Fuuka abruptly stood up.

The Atika region was located far away from the country's capital city Ode, where Fuuka was born and raised. A border region, or rather, the boonies.

"I really must have lost my mind, after all!!!"

On that pleasant morning, as the carriage drove along, Fuuka's screams echoed across the sky.

By the way, the Atika region was renowned for its rice production.

Day 0: Backstory and the Bridal Wars

In this world, there was something called the “bridal wars.” It was a conflict waged by the noble class in the capital Ode, and it was fought tooth and nail. By marrying their daughters to the sons of higher-class families, nobles elevated their own family’s status. It was a tradition that had continued for hundreds of years, dating back to when high society had first emerged.

In any case, the daughters of nobles were raised with the teaching that “securing a good marriage is the pride of being born a daughter of a noble house.” And so, as these girls came of age, they flocked into society and searched for marriageable partners.

How’s that for a classic otome game?

Miyako Florence, reincarnated from another world, proved no exception and ended up taking part in the bridal wars.

Hmm, it’s not so bad in 2D, but in real life it’s actually pretty rough, thought Miyako.

On that day, that fateful day, there was a tea party hosted by Klaus Reinhardt, heir to Marquis Reinhardt. That was the day of a decisive battle in the bridal wars, as direct contact with target families was possible. On that day, many girls from the lowliest families to the greatest dressed themselves up and gathered in the gardens of the Reinhardt mansion.

People, people, and more people packed into the mansion. In addition to the young ladies, various accompanying attendants, such as ladies’ maids and butlers, filled the crowd. The smell of perfume was stifling. Everyone jostled for the chance to chat with Klaus.

As for Miyako, thanks to being reincarnated in this world as the game’s heroine, she’d managed to elicit the words “You’re an interesting woman” from Klaus. But if she were honest, she couldn’t have cared less. There was only one person Miyako wanted to meet at this party: the villainess, Fuuka Hamilton.

“Um, sorry, I’m in a rush!” she’d said, walking past Klaus and wandering through the crowd.

And then, Miyako met *her*. Her beloved villainess.

“You there. What exactly do you think you’re doing?”

A dignified voice rang out. Appearing before her was a young woman wearing a violet dress, which complemented her black hair.

She had perfect posture and a fan clutched elegantly in her slender fingers. Her makeup was on the modest side, but perfectly set off her eyes with their glowing violet irises that projected her strength of will.

Those eyes were fixed in a hateful stare towards Miyako.

“Fu, Fu...” Miyako’s voice stuttered, and she inadvertently let out a shout. “Fuuka-chan!”

“You’re acting very familiar for someone I’ve just met. Who are you?”

With a large grin, Miyako approached Fuuka, the woman who ought to have been her rival, the villainess of the world of *Drop Fantasia*. As a result...

“Ouch!”

Fuuka struck her on the hand as hard as she could with her fan.

“Really. Just what were you playing at, with that attitude back there?!” said Fuuka sharply.

“Back where?”

“Your attitude towards Klaus Reinhardt. The Reinhardts are the hosts of this tea party. That means Klaus-sama is the one you should be speaking to right now, over anyone else. And yet, what did you do? You were lucky enough to get the chance to speak with him, and you ran away.”

Fuuka’s eyes shot daggers at Miyako.

In the game, the heroine’s target witnessed Fuuka yelling at the heroine like this and his opinion of Fuuka dropped. *Someone might be coming right now.*

Not good! I don’t want Fuuka to go through anything bad!!

As soon as Miyako thought that, she got moving.

“This way!”

“Hey, hold—I’m not finished yet!”

Miyako ran to a maze in the corner of the garden, pulling Fuuka by the hand. Fuuka’s elegant frilly dress, most likely chosen just for this party, fluttered. The soldiers of the bridal wars, dressed-up ladies entirely focused on the party, didn’t spare a second glance for the maze made from rose hedges.

Taking advantage of that, they ran, and ran.

“Phew. We should be okay all the way over here.”

“Y-You! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Sorry, Fuuka-chan. I’m Miyako Florence. I hope we can get along...” Miyako turned around to Fuuka with a smile.

“Let go of me!”

Slap!

“Whoa—aah!”

Pushed away, Miyako staggered. In her stumbling, she caught herself on a thorn and the crimson dress she was wearing ripped.

“Ah!”

“Ahh!”

At the ripping sound, they both stopped for a moment. Fuuka opened her eyes wide, worried she had messed up, but a second later she regained her stern expression.

“Hmph! I’ve never even heard of the Florence family. I take it you’re not a noble from the capital? Keep your hands off me. You’ll turn me into a country bumpkin like you.”

“I *am* from the country. Well-spotted, Fuuka-chan.”

“You calling me ‘Fuuka-chan’ gets on my nerves as well. I’m a member of the Hamilton family of the capital; if you had any manners you would call me ‘Fuuka-sama.’”

“Ahaha, that just slipped out.”

“That’s not good enough! And that dress! It’s all ripped and shabby, so don’t you think you had better be heading home?”

“Er, ah, well. I *do* want to go home.”

“Then hurry up and begone! And who chose that red dress, anyway? That color is reserved for the members of Count Scarlett’s family! If you go wandering about wearing that, people will get the wrong idea.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

“Ignorance is a sin. If you have no intention of taking part in the bridal wars, then leave. You’re an eyesore.” Fuuka glared sharply at Miyako. “High society is all about dragging each other down,” Fuuka continued. “I can’t believe that you would walk around showing such weakness. I think lackadaisical country bumpkins are happier at home, don’t you?”

Don’t show weakness in public. That’s what she’s getting at. Her strict attitude might be her way of showing kindness.

“If you don’t mind,” Miyako started a wild request that she knew Fuuka would probably turn down at the moment, “would you come to the countryside with me?”

“...What?”

“It’s a really nice place, rich in nature. As long as you’re happy to, then maybe sometime soon you—”

“I don’t have the time for that, nor do I have the slightest intention of getting friendly with my enemies.”

Fuuka cut Miyako off abruptly and turned on her heels to leave. Without looking back, Fuuka declared as though telling herself, “I will win the bridal wars, whatever it takes. That’s my one and only value.”

Miyako watched Fuuka briskly make her exit. Seeing her put on a bold front, so as not to show weakness to anybody, Miyako felt the urge to someday win Fuuka’s heart.

Fuuka Hamilton continued to build a reputation as each day passed, although not a good one. Haughty, mean-spirited, with no qualms about knocking others down a peg, she was the monstrous count's daughter. The words and deeds of Fuuka Hamilton were the topic of choice at the tea parties popular among noble ladies.

Nobles in the capital held tea parties every week at noon in turn, and they staked their prestige on making them as extravagant as possible. The tea parties held by higher nobles with heirs of marriageable age became the main battlegrounds of the bridal wars. Conversely, the tea parties with no outstanding candidates for marriage in attendance turned into rumor mills for young ladies to swap gossip. In the game *Drop Fantasia*, these were the information-gathering events.

There, too, Miyako stood out.

"Ah, *Fuuka-chaaan*, over here!"

Miyako, wearing a carefree smile from ear to ear, waved her hand at Fuuka, whom everyone else feared.

"Heh heh. Looking as cute as ever today, Fuuka-chan."

While everyone else surrounding the round table appeared to be gracefully enjoying the party, Fuuka sat there without the faintest trace of a smile.

Miyako seated herself next to her without hesitation. Blushing, she took Fuuka's hand and began to talk to her.

"Heh heh, I'm glad I got to see you again today."

"Well, I'm not."

"Whoa, no mercy?!"

The perfect smile Fuuka normally wore when she was in high society was nowhere to be seen. Not trying to hide her deeply furrowing brows, she cast off Miyako's hand.

"I have no intention of getting along with you. All noble women of the same age are each other's enemies, after all."

"Enemies..."

"It's the truth. Be it the bridal wars, problems of succession, the quality of our children... They're the people I'll have to contend with for the sake of my family," rattled off Fuuka with a deadpan expression.

"Th-That's not true! Um, well, maybe it is, but..."

"In that case, you ought to reconsider that overly friendly attitude of yours."

"But..." Miyako struggled to think of a reply.

Fuuka said, looking incredibly lonely as she walked away without looking back at Miyako, "Please don't talk to me again; you might

infect me with your country-bumpkinness.”

Going forward, Miyako took every chance she could get to speak to Fuuka, but Fuuka remained stubborn.

And so, Miyako decided that she herself would win the bridal wars waged around Klaus, heir to the Reinhardt family—and then have him cancel their engagement. After that, she would put an end to everything and once more confess her feelings to Fuuka.

The days passed, and Miyako and Fuuka maintained this relationship. Fuuka had no idea that the two of them would end up running away together, not a care in the world.

Day 1, Morning: The Start of a Slow Life

There was a voice. Still dreaming and in a light slumber, Fuuka listened to that voice. It was telling her to wake up... extremely loudly.

“Fuuka-chan, goooood morning!!!”

“Hmm?”

“Whoa, cute as ever today! I can’t believe I get to wake up with you. I’m so happy!”

That ridiculously loud voice proclaimed something that would give anybody listening the wrong impression.

Oh, that’s right. This stiff bed. This isn’t my home.

“...Miyako?”

Fuuka called out that name, the name of the woman with auburn hair beaming in front of her. Fuuka rubbed her sleepy eyes and inspected her surroundings.

Ah, that’s right, she remembered.

“I really did run away from the mansion, didn’t I?”

“You sure did. Well done on the long journey, Fuuka-chan.”

“And I’ve come to the Atika region, of all places...”

Fuuka let out a large sigh from inside the warm bed.

After a full day of traveling in the carriage, the place they finally reached late the night before was a rustic, isolated house in the Atika region, far to the north of the capital Ode. Apparently the cottage belonged to Miyako’s family. It had a dining room with a fireplace, a modest kitchen, a pantry, and only one bedroom.

Accustomed to living in a mansion all her life, Fuuka almost fainted.

If there’s only one bedroom, how are Miyako and I both supposed to sleep? Sleeping with others is something only lowly commoners do.

“I suppose the nights are too cold to make her sleep outside.”

“Huh? Fuuka-chan, it feels like you’re trying to force me out like that’s normal?! I’m shocked!”

That was the only conversation they had before going to sleep. Although there was only one bedroom, inside were two beds

arranged adjacent to the left and right walls. Fuuka pulled the dress from her exhausted body and collapsed into bed. The immaculately prepared bed was much firmer than the feather bed in her mansion, but it didn't smell musty.

Fuuka didn't remember exactly when she'd fallen asleep. Her body was tired and her heart strained, so she drifted into a pleasant slumber the moment the tension eased.

"I really have come all the way to the Atika region, haven't I?"

"Yeah. It's a great place!"

"Just what are you expecting us to do here?"

"Huh?"

The scenery they had seen through the carriage's window in the darkness had been rice fields, mountains, forests, and rivers everywhere they'd looked.

What's Miyako planning, bringing me all the way out here? I can't imagine there's anything of value we can do here.

"Nothing."

"...What?"

"Like I said. I've come here to 'do nothing' with you, Fuuka-chan."
To do... nothing?

"What do you mean?"

Now it was Fuuka's turn to look puzzled. For as long as she could remember, she had always been on the go. Whether it was the ways of courtesy, academics, or white magic, she had continuously studied. She needed knowledge to someday emerge victorious from the bridal wars, the battle to forge marital ties with the highest nobles, for the sake of the Hamilton family. Fuuka was not permitted to stop moving forward.

"Again, it's exactly what it sounds like. Although I borrowed the idea from a honey-loving yellow bear."

"A yellow bear...?"

"Sorry, I was talking to myself there. More importantly, Fuuka-chan, let's get some lunch."

At the word "lunch," Fuuka remembered how hungry she was. She noticed a warm scent drifting in. When she sniffed, her stomach let out a rumble, and she blushed.

"Wait, lunch? Don't you mean breakfast?"

"No? It's already midday."

"...What did you just say?!"

Fuuka leapt up in a hurry and looked out the window. Rice fields stretched out beyond the garden, and the sun was in the middle of the sky. It was the very picture of a pleasant, warm afternoon.

“No, no, no, no, no!”

Fuuka lost her composure.

“I’ve overslept! *Me?! What do I do? What about my morning reading? What about my seven-o’clock calisthenics?! I was supposed to greet Father at eight, and work on my commercial sciences and language studies starting at nine!!*”

“Hahaha.”

“This isn’t funny!”

Fuuka cradled her head in her hands, worried about what to do.

I have a tight schedule set from when I wake up at five to when I go to bed late at night. It’s supposed to be my routine. If I don’t have my daily hard work, what do I have left...?

“Fuuka-chan, your complexion looks a lot better.”

“What?”

“Here, have a look in the mirror.”

Fuuka peered into the mirror Miyako handed her and let out a gasp. The black bags under her eyes she always had to hide with makeup were nowhere to be found.

My face looks smooth, my cheeks look rosy, and even the tension in my shoulders I’ve been worrying about seems to have eased. Could it be now that I’ve had a little relief from my chronic lack of sleep, my health has gotten better?

“See? It’s wonderful how hard you work, but I like seeing you the way you are this morning too.”

“I take it you mean that resting well is a part of working hard?”

“Exactly!” Miyako nodded, satisfied, in response to what Fuuka had said.

Now that I think about it, I wonder when the last time I got this much sleep was. It feels like it was so long ago I can’t even remember.

“While we’re here, we’ll wake up in the morning and make food and go on walks. We’ll do all sorts of things and take it easy. Every now and then we can sit and just watch the sky, and it might be nice to go play by the river too. And have picnics!”

“Picnics...”

I expect the picnics Miyako’s talking about aren’t the same as the ones overrun with intrigue where nobles try to out-snob each other, just the outdoor version of high society. I would always get stomachaches from the pressure the night before one of the picnics hosted by some powerful noble. A picnic unfettered by any of that might actually be... fun.

“That’s what ‘doing nothing’ is!” said Miyako with a full-faced smile that thoroughly disarmed Fuuka.

“Let’s eat breakfast! I’ve done a good job of this one.”

“What, you made it yourself? Not a servant?!”

“Yep. Um, there aren’t any servants here! I had the driver go back

to the capital too, so the two of us will be doing a lot while we're living here."

"..."

"Oh, could it be that you can't do housework, Fuuka-chan?"

"I-I can do anything you can!"

Fuuka got worked up and shouted, at which Miyako let out a pleasant laugh.

"...Fuuka-chan, I hope we can be happy together."

"I don't see how this slothful and low-class lifestyle is supposed to make me feel happy."

"Heh heh. I've got two weeks... A full fourteen days. I'll try my best."

"Hmph, well I did promise. By the honor of the venerable Hamilton family, I'll keep my promise."

If Fuuka said "I'm happy" in fourteen days, Miyako would win. Otherwise, Fuuka would win.

This was the first morning of that odd slow life.

Day 1, Night: Campfires and Butter Potatoes

“Cleaning the garden did take all day after all,” said Miyako.

The evening sky was dark; only a fraction of the western sky far in the distance still smoldered. The crackling of firewood and the rustling of leaves rocked by the night breeze were pleasing to the ear.

Without looking up to the heavens, just beginning to sparkle with scattered stars, Fuuka heaved a sigh.

“Ugh... I’m *tired*. I’m not happy at all.”

“Haha, thanks for helping out so much, Fuuka-chan.”

They made the campfire from what they’d gathered, fallen leaves and withered branches strewn across the garden.

All Fuuka had actually done for the day was pick up the smallest branches with great care so as not to dirty her dress. Dressed in the work clothes she had prepared in the cabin and with a broom in hand, Miyako did most of the work.

“Is your dress still clean?”

“Yes, it’s fine.”

“I *do* have another set of clothes for you, too.”

“No member of the Hamilton family could ever put on such shabby clothes!”

“Haha, if you ever want to try them on just let me know, okay?”

“If you have any silks, I might wear those.”

It was customary in the Atika region to spend the night making a magnificent fire like this on the first day after moving in. It let the animals living in the forest know that humans had taken up residence.

Calmness fell over them as they listened to the dry crackling and popping sounds and watched the flames dancing.

“Ah, it’s ready.”

Miyako pulled a potato from the fire. The world of *Drop Fantasia* had potatoes. There were many unusual plants and animals, but they had potatoes.

I took the potatoes I boiled in the kitchen and then baked them in the fire—

“Here’s yours. Careful, it’s hot!”

And I dolloped on that stuff I’ve kept just for this—

“Hold on, Miyako. Potatoes aren’t bread, you know? Why are you wasting our precious butter on them?!”

And voilà, we've made butter potatoes!

"Heh heh, these are butter potatoes!"

"Butter potatoes..."

"Come on, have a bite."

Fuuka-chan looks so adorable when she's puzzled.

Miyako had wanted to make these over a campfire so badly that she went out of her way to procure potatoes and butter before leaving the capital.

Fuuka hesitantly took a bite of her butter potato. Her eyes widened, and she sank her teeth in for another bite.

"...Not bad."

"Ehehe, you're telling me!"

Fuuka-chan's wolfing it down, so it looks like she likes it. While stoking the fire, Miyako peacefully watched Fuuka as she ate.

She'd always liked the outdoors. Miyako was into otome games, but she would also go camping, grow vegetables, and do gardening. She loved all sorts of leisurely activities.

And yet, after she became an adult, all she had was work, work, work, and more work. Before she knew it, whether she liked it or not, all she did was travel back and forth between her office and her house.

Ah, and to think that now it's just me and my villainess first crush sitting around a campfire beneath the night sky.

"Oh, I'm so happy. I could just scream. I'm so happy!!!"

"You're not going to trick me into joining in." Fuuka flashed a cold glare at Miyako.

If only she'd said "I'm happy," I'd have won. Miyako puffed out her cheeks using her muscles to their fullest, the same way she used to when she was young and her friends would call her "Pufferfish."

"I wasn't trying to."

"Ha, what a weird face."

"No way, you laughed!"

"...No, I didn't."

"You so did."

As they continued going back and forth, Fuuka's eyelids began to droop. For Fuuka, after years of chronic sleep deprivation, having a large meal after working and exercising her body, then listening to the soothing sound of the fire all worked together to make her drowsy.

"Ah, are you going to bed?"

"No... I still need to do... my nighttime studies... my calisthenics..."

"Don't push yourself. The plan was to 'do nothing,' remember?"

"But..."

"I suppose I'll be off to bed too. We'll leave bathing for

tomorrow!" said Miyako, and she pulled Fuuka by the hand.

Fuuka must have been at peak drowsiness since she obediently followed along and crawled into bed as soon as she took off her dress. It didn't take long for Miyako to hear that she was sound asleep.

"Ugh... Gotta say I'm pretty tired too."

After Miyako confirmed that Fuuka was asleep, she smiled and stretched.

"Ouch. Looks like I'll have sore muscles tomorrow."

A whole day's work in the garden really was tough.

Miyako let down her auburn hair, which she'd tied up to work, and crawled into her bed. Her eyes grew heavy as she watched Fuuka sleeping peacefully in the bed on the opposite side of the room.

I hope Fuuka says "I'm happy" in the next thirteen days, she wished as she drifted off to sleep.

"Fuuka-chan, let's be happy together."

Day 2, Morning: Bouquets and Clearing Weeds

Miyako awoke to a world of muscle pain.

“Ow-ow-ow-ow.”

Miyako whined from inside her bed. Although she was only nineteen, she wasn’t used to exercise, so a full day of garden work had taken its toll on her.

That’s what I get for being able to keep working when I should stop. This nineteen-year-old body is going to get me into trouble. My legs are trembling. It hurts so much.

“Ugh, breakfast. Breakfast.”

Miyako quite literally crawled to the kitchen to make breakfast before Fuuka woke up.

But when she got there—

“You’re late, Miyako.”

“Huh, Fuuka-chan?!”

Fuuka was in the kitchen stirring a pot, wearing an apron over her dress. She’d even gone as far as wearing a bandanna to keep her hair back. Fuuka looked like an overachieving home economics student. She was cute, to say the least.

“Whoa, you look adorable, Fuuka-chan. But didn’t you want to get more sleep?”

“Sleeping in two days in a row would be a disgrace to the Hamilton family.”

“Geez, you’re too straight-laced. Ehehe, even so, I’m excited to try your soup.”

Momentarily forgetting her sore muscles, Miyako sat at the table. Before long a bowl of soup with steam rising from it was placed in front of her.

“It’s something I made myself, so be grateful you get to eat it.”

“Will do, *bon appétit!*”

She scooped some up with a spoon and brought it to her mouth.

“…”

“…”

It was lacking in taste. Completely lacking in taste. Utterly tasteless. The only ingredient in the soup was potatoes.

I see, she mustn’t have put in any juicy vegetables or condiments.

“I-I wasn’t in top form today, that’s all.”

“No, it tastes good, Fuuka-chan.”

“And there aren’t any cookbooks in here!”

“We should go to the library in the village at some point.”

Fuuka was a lady of the Hamilton family. She had likely never once in her life tried her hand at cooking. So Miyako was happy that she had set aside some time in the morning to see what she was capable of.

I love that Fuuka-chan’s puffing out her cheeks at this tasteless soup but still eating it all.

And also...

“I love how you arranged these flowers.”

“Hmph, it’s part of being a lady.”

“I see. I’m glad.”

There was a small vase above the table. Arranged inside were the roses that Miyako had given to Fuuka inside the carriage.

Feeling uncontrollably happy at that, Miyako wolfed down the tasteless soup with a bright smile on her face.

“Before I forget, Fuuka-chan, let’s hold off on taking a bath until the afternoon,” said Miyako while blowing on the tea Fuuka had made for her. *This one really is tasty!* thought Miyako.

“...I would prefer to wash off this sweat sooner rather than later,” protested Fuuka, unsatisfied.

Smiling at her reaction, Miyako dropped her voice to a whisper.

“The thing is, and this is a secret that I only know because I’m from here—”

Fuuka gulped. “A secret... What is it?”

“At midday today, there’s gonna be... a traveling merchant!!! Yahooooo!!!”

“I was an idiot for taking you seriously.”

“Huh?! This is major; super serious! We wouldn’t want to make do with just the shelf-stable food that was already here. We’ve got to stock up on ingredients!”

Miyako didn’t let up. When she played the otome game *Drop Fantasia*, the Atika region was the only area without an item shop. Instead, it was set up so that at a certain time each day the player would run into a traveling merchant and be able to obtain a valuable item at random.

Fuuka furrowed her brow in suspicion.

“Ingredients are all the same. I doubt there’ll be any pies or cakes out here in the country anyway.”

“They’re not all the same! Atikan cuisine is really tasty!”

Miyako didn’t relent. As a matter of fact, the Atika region was

famous for its rice and vegetable production.

“...Well. If you’re *that* keen on it, I’ll leave it up to you,” said Fuuka, sighing.

Going by the tasteless soup from this morning, it’s probably better to let Miyako handle the cooking side of things. This is a far cry from my mansion in the capital, where I could eat anything I wanted. Was Miyako’s promise to make me happy just empty words?

“Yep. Now then, Fuuka-chan, I’m off to get some work done!”

“Hm? But we finished the garden yesterday.”

“Well, this land is farmland that my family owns, but there hasn’t been anybody looking after it. I’m borrowing it because I thought it would be a perfect place to hide out. But while we’re here, I figure I might as well fix it up.” And so— “Today... I’m weeding the field!” declared Miyako, full of enthusiasm.

To get straight to the point, Miyako had trouble trying to clear the weeds while suffering from muscle pain.

“Oooouuuch, feels like my legs are gonna fall off.”

Each time Miyako stooped down, a stab of pain shot up her legs and back. It had been an hour since she started working, but Miyako had finished weeding less than one tenth of the small field.

“Oooh, my legs *huuurt!*”

Miyako wiped away her sweat, whimpering. Straggling strands of her braided auburn hair stuck to her neck with sweat.

Fuuka had been sitting in a chair she’d placed in the shade beneath the eaves, watching Miyako intently. But she must have gotten fed up because she was no longer anywhere in sight.

Today’s the second day. I could say it’s “still just” the second day. But with two weeks—the fourteen-day time limit, that is—I could also say it’s “already” the second day.

“Hmmm. I hope I didn’t mess up somehow.”

Just as she grumbled this, a dignified voice called out.

“Really, I just couldn’t stand watching you!”

“...Fuuka-chan!”

When she looked over, standing there was Fuuka, in the matching work clothes Miyako had prepared for her, camel-colored overalls and a checkered shirt. Her lustrous black hair was tied up in a ponytail.

Soo cute!!!

“Whoa, Fuuka-chan’s new costume!! Yes!!!”

“Wai—I really would prefer you not hug me so hard. Watch the mud!”

“It’s fine, it’s not a dress!”

“Wait, aren’t you supposed to have sore muscles?!?! And here I

am helping you.”

“Ehehe, it cleared up as soon as I saw you! Thanks for helping out. I’m glad.”

“W-Well, I...”

Fuuka clammed up. To sum up what she mumbled afterwards:

“It’s just that watching you doing the weeding so awkwardly, you sort of looked like you were having fun, that’s all! Now then, let’s get this finished quickly!”

“Right.”

By the time the sun was right above them signaling noon, they’d more or less finished weeding the small field.

All right, it’s midday. The traveling merchant will be here any minute now.

Day 2, Noon: The Traveling Merchant and the Formidable Villainess

It was around noon when they finished up clearing the weeds, thanks to having two pairs of hands working on it, and the star of Atika, the merchant who traveled from house to house, came calling.

She came riding a covered wagon, clip-clopping along. The traveling merchant approached slowly from the distance. Upon seeing Miyako and Fuuka, she waved her hand happily.

“Well, well, well. There really are two young ladies here. My merchant’s instincts were right.” The traveling merchant was a small girl with hair the color of an autumn wheat field, which was tied up in two buns. She had a cat’s smile. “I’m Shan Li. I look forward to doing business with you.”

She appeared to be from a clan from the Western Continent. *She might sell us something rare*, thought Miyako.

“Oh my, don’t you two look cute in your matching work clothes!”

“Heh heh. Matching with Fuuka-chan... It’s a little embarrassing hearing someone else say it! Thank you, sweetie!!”

Sweetie. When Miyako said that with a smile, the merchant girl Shan Li’s expression stiffened. *Uh, huh? Did I say something I shouldn’t have?*

“*Sweetie?! Excuse me, I’m no little girl!!!* ○ × ★ % ○ % ~ !!”

“Oh, err, *s-sorry?!!*”

Suddenly bombarded with words from the language of the Continent, Miyako panicked. *I have no clue what she’s saying*.

“For goodness’ sake, step aside, Miyako,” came Fuuka’s voice.

“Huh?” said Miyako. And when she turned around...

“Excuse me, Shan Li-san. % × & ○ ☆ ~ ?”

“○ ☆ ! ☆ ≡ × % & ~ ”

Fuuka began speaking in fluent Continental. After studying every morning of every single day, Fuuka was proficient in Continental, and a feline smile soon returned to Shan Li’s face.

“Apparently Shan Li-san turned thirty this year,” said Fuuka,

turning back around to Miyako.

“Oh, rea—... Wait, what?!”

“Really now, calling your elders ‘sweetie.’ Talk about disrespectful.”

“Indeed,” agreed Fuuka.

“When did you two become such peas in a pod? I mean, any way you look at her, Shan Li’s a teen—”

“Miyako?”

“A beautiful woman.”

“Much better.”

Miyako cradled her head as it spun in circles. *Thirty? Really??? But she doesn’t look a day older than fifteen, if that???*

“By way of an apology, every day for the next two weeks we’ll be buying ‘Big Sis Shan Li’s Daily Goodie Pack.’”

“Say what?!” *Just when did that deal get made?!* “Fuuka-chan, you can’t just...”

“Oh, girl, I’ve seen you around before, now that I think about it. You’re the Florences’ girl, aren’t you?”

Gulp. Miyako froze.

Shan Li smirked like a cat.

“I stopped by the Florence house yesterday, and they didn’t say anything about this place. In fact, all they yapped on about was ‘We’re so relieved that our little tomboy is in the capital now. She’s even engaged!’”

“Ah, um, about that...”

I’m keeping quiet to my family about the engagement getting canceled. They’d never expect that I’m so close by, so I thought I’d be able to keep them fooled for a little while. Only the driver that got us here knows we’re here, and I’ve bought his silence. He’s always wanted to live in the south, and as of yesterday he should have retired and gone straight on vacation.

“Uh-oh...”

“Hm? I’m not the type to run my mouth...” she said with her feline smile. “Not about my *paying customers*, that is.”

And so, it was decided that from that day on, they would purchase a regular order from Shan Li.

“I’ll knock the price right down, in recognition of Fuuka’s superb Continental negotiations.”

“Oh, thank you so much, Shan Li-san!”

“You’d make a fine merchant, Fuuka. Bye-bye!”

Miyako found Fuuka chuckling to herself victoriously to be so *incredibly cute, oh my God*, so she decided that this situation was okay too.

“...Hold up, this stuff is actually really good!”

In the afternoon Miyako opened the jute bag that was the “Goodie Pack” they’d bought from Shan Li to have something to eat before they left to have a bath. There were eggs, milk, cheese, bread, vegetables (both root and otherwise), herbs, and to top it off, smoked meats and bacon.

“All *this* for *that* price?! You mean she’s not actually a crook?!”

“Hmph. I’ve never *shopped* before, but I take it she gave us a good deal?”

“You’re amazing, Fuuka-chan! Talk about *haggling*!!”

Miyako impulsively hugged Fuuka.

“Would you mind not hugging me like it’s no big deal, please?”

Fuuka glared at her in disgust.

“Huh.”

“Why are you acting shocked at that?”

“Well, you made me breakfast, and you helped me out with the weeds... But now you’ve gone back to acting cold...?”

“I-I don’t know what exactly you’re misunderstanding; I just decided that it would be more efficient to do those things.”

“No way! You definitely said that clearing the weeds ‘looked fun’!”

“The white magic and herbal medicines I studied are an essential part of who I am. I couldn’t let the servants see me working in the field when I was at my mansion, but as an aspiring practitioner of white magic, I’ve always dreamed of having a field to tend to.”

“Ehh, so then...”

“It’s not like I was doing it for you or anything. Got it, Miyako?” she said. “I’m definitely *not* happy.”

Miyako scratched her head at Fuuka as she turned her back on her.

“...Keep telling yourself that.”

“Did you say something?!”

“*Noo*othing.”

They decided to have an easy lunch, going with bread, cheese, and the re-seasoned leftovers from that morning’s soup.

Now then, when the afternoon comes let’s go for a bath.

Day 2, Evening: Hot Springs and Medicinal Herbs

The mountain road was awash with the smell of trees. Not used to that, having grown up in the capital, Fuuka took a deep breath. Miyako walked ahead, while Fuuka gazed at the back of her former rival in love, wondering, *Why, why in the world did I take her hand?*

“We’re almost there, Fuuka-chan.”

“I’ve had enough of these mountain roads...”

“The open-air bath is gonna feel great!”

Open-air bath. Fuuka shrugged her shoulders at this unfamiliar phrase. *I didn’t notice when I knew her as a rival, but Miyako really is quite the eccentric.*

“For today, let’s get in the bath, warm ourselves up, and then have an early night! It looks like the weather’s gonna turn tonight anyway.”

“How can you tell?”

“Look, the sky in the west.” Miyako pointed at the sky. The western part of the sky was dark. “The weather travels from the west!”

“...Wow.”

She can read the sky, admired Fuuka.

Reading the sky was one of the techniques taught as part of white magic. In this country, white magic had been the choice of girls from respectable families since ancient times. But now most people used their wealth to buy the title of “master” in name only.

The Hamilton family was no exception to this. Fuuka’s father told her, “If you’ve got the time to waste studying white magic, then go buy a dress or something instead.” Fuuka shot back with “If I don’t earn it myself, there’s no meaning in saying I’ve mastered it.”

Looking back on it now, I don’t think Father liked that either. But there really is no point unless I win it by myself, thought Fuuka. *I’m sure I’m right about that.*

“The clouds’re still far away, so hopefully the weather will last until we get home.”

Miyako’s using her knowledge of white magic so skillfully. She must be a much harder worker than I initially gave her credit for, thought Fuuka.

Although the truth was that in Japan, where Miyako once lived, being able to tell how the weather changed was just common knowledge.

“Hm, you’re not half bad, Miyako.”

"Huh? Did you just give me a compliment?!"

"No."

"Argh, too bad."

If I'm honest with myself, taking Miyako's hand was just a momentary lapse. I was a little worn out. Life here has been filled with things that I could never have done in the capital. I was able to work in the field like I'd always wanted to and try cooking, which was harder than I thought it'd be. And today was the first time I've ever been able to use Continental in a real conversation, after all those years of studying. I know that it was half lip service when Shan Li said that I'd make a fine merchant, but it made my heart leap. I can't even really describe it. All the work I've put in is paying off in the real world through my own efforts. To put it incredibly simply... It feels like my exhaustion just melted away.

"That's it. I was just a little worn out."

"What's that?"

"Nothing."

That's all; I was a little worn out. So, when I took her hand by the window as the wind blew in, her strong, pale hand, I was just a little worn out. I'm sure of it, just a little worn out.

So, I'll use these two weeks to relax. "You have two weeks; make me say 'I'm happy' before then." That's what I said, but I neither intend nor expect to say 'I'm happy.' This is just a two-week-long prank.

Just then, a plant growing by the riverbank caught her eye. It was a medicinal herb she had only ever seen in field books.

"Is that moonlight grass?"

"Hm? What's that, Fuuka-chan?"

"It's a rare medicinal herb. It's a highly potent alpine plant said to carry the blessing of the moon goddess, and to be effective against any and all diseases."

"Really? Should we grab some?"

"No, it's okay," said Fuuka, shaking her head. "Moonlight grass is famous for being difficult to preserve. We shouldn't waste it."

"Right. That makes sense."

Fuuka inched closer to it.

Then another inch, and another.

"..."

"With that said, I don't think there's anything wrong with just observing it from closer up, is there?"

"Heh heh, nope. I don't think there is, Fuuka-chan!"

Once I'm back in the capital, I'll probably never have another chance to look at wild moonlight grass. So that's that, my hand has been forced.

"All right, wait there for a moment. I'll... Ah-Aaaah!!"

Jubilant, Fuuka tried to descend into the stream, but her foothold was muddy, and... *splash.*

Steam rose, lovely and warm, in this secluded hot spring. Fuuka let a moan escape, and trembled.

“Aaaah... it feels so good...”

It's so warm. I can feel it warming my frozen body from the inside out! In fact, this feels far too good. What is this? I've never felt this good before...

“Ah, we sure are lucky there was a hot spring near us!”

“Miyako, why is your nose bleeding?”

“Ahaha, the blood must have gone to my head,” laughed Miyako, wiping the blood away.

Fuuka put some distance between them.

Day 3, Morning: Milk Soup and Realizations

What do I do, what do I do, what do I do? thought Miyako, staring at the ceiling. She lay in the bed that almost blocked the entrance to the sole bedroom of the modest house, where the sound of Fuuka sleeping was all that could be heard.

Ohh. Ohh, what do I do? I can't get Fuuka-chan out of my head!!

To summarize. Or rather, to state the obvious. *I can't stop thinking about her because I went and did something stupid like sharing a bath with her!!!*

The natural open-air hot spring with its ridiculous therapeutic effects. That's why Miyako had gone there with her, but it had been careless. Fuuka's glossy black hair, her milky white skin, and her legs stretching from her slender yet curvaceous waist occupied Miyako's mind. The sound of her sleeping in the bed on the opposite side of the room filled Miyako's ears.

Not good. I'm kinda turned on. Miyako shut her eyes hard. *She's a hard worker, and she's got a self-sacrificial streak; she's the tragic villainess. I knew I loved her, and I knew I wanted to make her happy, but...*

But I never for a second thought I loved her in a romantic way!

"...Okay, let's just get some sleep for now," whispered Miyako to herself, and she covered herself with the blanket.

The next morning.

"My word, what's happened to you, Miyako?!"

"...Morning."

"And a mumbled good morning to you, too. So, what's wrong? Why are there bags under your eyes?"

Well, I couldn't get any sleep. Yup.

"You see, um... I had some stuff on my mind."

"You hardly touched your dinner last night either."

"My *heart* was full, so..."

"For goodness' sake, you're the one who said we should just 'do nothing.'"

Ugh, I've got no comeback to that. Miyako groaned. *I was trying to lead a fun, slow life with Fuuka-chan. What am I doing making myself ill? Get used to Fuuka-chan's beauty already!!*

"For now, I'll get breakfast going," said Miyako.

Miyako prepared breakfast from suitable ingredients she took from "Shan Li's Goodie Pack," purchased from the beautiful girl—or rather, young woman—Shan Li, the traveling merchant. Deprived of sleep, all Miyako could manage was bacon and eggs, a vegetable milk soup, toasted bread... Only things which could be made quickly.

Even so, I've done a good job. Or at least, I thought I had, but...

"What's wrong, Fuuka-chan? You're making an odd face."

Miyako tilted her head.

Fuuka had taken a mouthful of the soup and the bacon and eggs. She then closed her eyes and went silent as though deep in thought.

"Miyako, were you ever an apprentice to a famous chef, or something of that sort?"

"Huh? No way, I've never done anything like that. If I had to say, the most I've done is cook for myself when I worked at a company and had no money."

"A company?"

"Don't worry, it doesn't matter."

"Hmph. But even so..." grumbled Fuuka. "Even so, this tastes *too* good."

"Huh? If you compliment me too much, I'll... *gwaa!*"

Fuuka screamed. "Wh-What's happening?!"

Miyako's nose was bleeding. *That's what happens when you look at me with your beautiful face and say my food's delicious.* Miyako desperately deleted Fuuka's naked body from her mind while pinching her nose. *Not good. Not good at all.*

"...Let's make our own bath," said Miyako.

"What?"

"I mean, the open-air bath yesterday did feel great, but I don't think my body can cope with going in there with you every day."

"What?! What's wrong with my body?! I've never for a single day skipped my calisthenics... Er, except for when I overslept two days ago."

Look who's serious.

"No, it's not that..." mumbled Miyako.

"Then what is it?"

"Um, you see... You're too pretty, Fuuka-chan."

"...This milk soup is just superb, isn't it?" said Fuuka, not commenting on what Miyako had said. She turned around as her ears

reddened.

Pouting when she gets embarrassed is one of her quirks, thought Miyako.

“Yeah. I made a lot of that milk soup, so I thought we could have some for lunch too.”

“It’s not bad. Not bad at all. If you ever fall from grace, I might hire you as a chef for the Hamilton family.”

“Heh heh, thanks. It makes me happy to hear you say that.”

Smiling brightly, Miyako tilted her head and looked at Fuuka.

Fuuka snorted, and said “I’m not.”

Ah, she really is a tough nut to crack.

They finished their breakfast in peace.

“Really, I’m not...”

Just how long has it been since I had a warm breakfast while speaking with someone else, thought Fuuka. *In the Hamilton mansion, I was always so pressed for time, I never even considered having a hot breakfast. I never had the chance.*

And the soup that Miyako made feels so warm.

Day 3, Evening: Meanwhile, in the Capital...?

“Miyako Florence has gone missing.”

Klaus Reinhardt's eyes flashed with surprise at that report.

The spy in the employ of the Reinhardt family was kneeling before its future head.

“So, what are you saying? That Miyako vanished from Ode the same night I broke off the engagement...?!”

“Yes, my lord.”

“What a... What a turn!”

Klaus's body was shaking. Shaking from joy.

Miyako Florence. That woman was my fiancée. Me, Klaus Reinhardt, who has always led the perfect life as a higher noble, with bags of money and lifelong popularity. And yet! And yet, not only did that country noble not seem happy when I proposed to her, she actually had the nerve to look vacant and say something like “Oh, cool. Sure... Uh! Sorry, I'm really happy! I really am, for real!!” and then mutter to herself “Is there an easy way to get out of this?”

I thought that was quite rude, but faced with her intelligence, her beauty, and her cleverness I told myself “That was just me mishearing things. Yes, I'm sure that's it,” and carried on life as her fiancé.

But every time I went to meet her at a time of her choosing, for some reason, bird crap would fall on my head. Every time I went to a meeting place she arranged, for some reason, I would tread in a gigantic pile of horse dung. The worst was when I fell in that hole. Who in the world dug that? But I managed to persevere for several months in spite of all that.

And then, and then! The moment I finally can't bear it anymore and tell her I'm calling off the engagement, she goes and runs away from the capital...?

“Miyako... So all of that was just you being shy!!!”

“...Huh? Klaus-sama, what did you just say?”

“Miyako ran away from the capital, right?! After I told her I'd broken off the engagement, clearly she couldn't bear the sadness and shame. So that's how it is. I always thought her attitude and behavior towards me were odd, but to think it was her hiding her embarrassment, a *tsundere* testing me out!! Ha ha ha ha!!!”

The spy swallowed back his sudden urge to quit and said, “That is a very *novel* interpretation, my lord,” and bowed his head even

further.

Klaus bellowed with laughter while the spy wondered what he should have for dinner that night.

“We must do something, spy!”

“...Steak.”

“Hm?”

“Oh! Forgive me, Klaus-sama! What were you saying?”

“Right. I want you to ascertain Miyako’s current whereabouts at once.”

“Which means... What? Um, it’s about time for me to call it a day, my lord...”

“Right. You’ll be working overtime.”

“B-But...”

Without even raising an eyebrow, Klaus ruined his spy’s dreams of a lovely steak dinner.

The spy swore to himself, *I am so looking for a new job.*

Blithely unaware of his subordinate’s thoughts, Klaus looked out the window and whispered to himself, “Miyako... sit tight. I *will* find you.”

It annoyed the spy that his lord looked mature on the outside, if not the inside, and so looked the part when he said this.

Miyako felt a shiver run down her spine.

“Achooo!”

“Are you all right, Miyako?!” asked Fuuka with a yelp.

It was a big sneeze, while they were on their way back from the hot spring.

What was that? thought Miyako. *Somehow I felt something really unpleasant from the direction of the capital.*

“Uh. Sorry, Fuuka-chan.”

“It really is cold, isn’t it? It wouldn’t be strange to catch a cold, doing this every night,” said Fuuka. *The open-air hot spring does feel great, but the warmth wears off before we make it back.* “This would all be solved if that cabin just had a shower!”

“Hmm, well, it was never meant for extended stays.”

Miyako thought about an indoor bath. *If I had one of those... Might we be able to make one ourselves?*

“Well, still.” Miyako breathed in a lungful of the air full of the smell of the earth and wind. She caught up to Fuuka, who was walking a little ahead of her. “This walk home does make me feel quite happy.”

“I’m. Not. Happy!”

“Haha, sure, sure.”

I think tomorrow will be a great day... I hope, thought Miyako.

Day 4: Hard Sells and Regional Cuisine

A small sigh escaped Miyako as she thought about the bath situation, or as she would call it the “Fuuka-chan is way too sexy” situation.

No, I do enjoy getting to bathe with Fuuka... I do, but I feel guilty that I can't keep my eyes to myself.

“...Having said that, I'm not sure how I could go about making a bath inside the cabin.”

Miyako, a former office worker, had no such skills. *It is a pain having to walk all the way to the natural hot spring, but I don't have any better ideas.*

The next morning, while Miyako was thinking about this, a cheerful voice reached her ears.

“Hey there! I'm here to deliver today's goodie bag. It's—wait for it—some gorgeous seafood!”

The traveling merchant from the Continent, Shan Li, visited again that day at noon and blissfully pulled out a huge red fish. As ever, she looked like such a young girl that her age being thirty seemed like a bad joke. *The Continent's four-thousand-year history isn't just for show,* thought Miyako.

Miyako, who came out to greet her, took one look at the big fish dangling from Shan Li's hands and squirmed.

“A f-fish? I can't cook that...”

“What's wrong, Miyako?”

As Fuuka appeared from behind Miyako, Shan Li greeted her with a wave.



“Mhmm, didn’t you promise to buy my goodie bag every day? Maybe I should let it slip that you two are here?”

Shan Li waved the big fish in front of them and smirked like a cat. She told them the mule pulling her carriage was descended from Red Rabbit, the fastest horse the Continent had ever seen. So if it came to it, Shan Li could get word to Miyako’s whole family about Miyako and Fuuka in no time at all. *No time at all.*

“Y-You’re pure evil!”

“You say something?”

“No, nothing...” whined Miyako.

Miyako had no options left.

“Hey, Miyako?”

“What’s up, Fuuka-chan?”

When Miyako turned around, she saw that Fuuka had at some point picked up a book. “The Local Cuisine of Atika” was written on its cover.

Oh yeah, there was a book like that on the bookshelf. It’s a pretty old recipe book. The fact that she’ll even read things like that speaks volumes about how much effort she puts in, or should I say her bookwormishness?

“Local cuisine...?”

“That’s right. The basic form of distribution in commerce is local production for local consumption. If you want to acquire something fresh and cheap, it is best to narrow your focus to what is found nearby. And that fish appears to be one you can find in the sea in Atika.”

“Wow, you really do know everything, Fuuka-chan.”

“I...! It’s just something I saw in the field guide at my mansion, nothing more. This is *your* home, you just don’t know anything!!”

“Fuuka-chan, your face has gone all red. You’re not embarrassed, are you?”

“*Miyako!!!*”

“Heh heh, sorry for teasing you.”

It’s so cute when you puff your cheeks out like that, too, thought Miyako.

Fuuka glared at Miyako, and then began some sort of negotiation with Shan Li in Continental.

Miyako found herself completely out of the loop.

“So that’s that. We’ll take the fish, Shan Li-san.”

“Great, thanks for your patronage.”

They watched Shan Li waving from her wagon as she left.

Fuuka held the splendid fish in her hands, as well as something else.

“What’s that, Fuuka-chan?”

“What it looks like, a stone.”

“Fuuka-chan, is this all right?”

Miyako left the cabin holding the things she’d been told to get ready. That was a wooden bucket, in which they’d put leafy vegetables, the fish, and the soup. Miyako had cleanly removed the fish’s innards and scales and boiled it in a pot with the vegetables earlier. The bucket full of soup made quite the impression.

“Yes, that’s fine. Things are coming along nicely on my end.”

After stoking the fire, Fuuka plucked something out of it with some tongs and stood up... It was a heated stone.

She had taken the smooth stone they had bought from Shan Li, meant to be a paperweight, and scrubbed it clean. Then she had heated it in the campfire for over an hour, and though it might not have looked it, it was piping hot.

“...I bet this would really burn you if I pressed it against you, Miyako.”

“Wh-What? Don’t scare me!”

“I’m joking. Just because you stole my life’s work, my marriage into the Reinhardt family, doesn’t mean I have the right to burn you with a hot stone.”

“...Uhhh.”

“And I’ll turn a blind eye to the fact that you kidnapped me and are holding me prisoner.”

“I-I might have kidnapped you, but you don’t look like a prisoner!”

“Since you dragged me all the way out to the country without any horses, I might as well be a prisoner. Miyako, could you bring that wooden bucket here, please?”

“S-Sure.”

Miyako placed the bucket down. After Fuuka said that to her, she started to feel she might have done something a little bit bad. But if Miyako had married Klaus Reinhardt, Fuuka would have still met a tragic end. *And anyway there’s no way in hell I’d marry that hysteric man whose only saving grace is his pretty face.*

“All right, here goes,” said Fuuka.

“Okay. Fuuka-chan, are you gonna tell me what you’re doing with that stone or wh— Whoaa!”

Fshhhhhhh.

“It looks like that went well,” said Fuuka.

Inside the bucket that Fuuka threw the heated stone into, the soup came to a boil in a split second. A pleasant smell filled the cabin.

“I’m told eating this while it’s hot is the way to go with Atikan

cuisine... Haha, even I can manage this!”

“Heh heh, yep! You’re amazing, Fuuka-chan.”

Although, Miyako did do most of the work preparing what went into the bucket.

But some things are better left unsaid.

Fuuka-chan making the effort to find out about my homeland’s local cuisine is just way too cute, thought Miyako, cradling her head.

“...But, this might be a problem,” said Miyako.

“We made a little too much...”

Enough soup—or rather, stone-heated stew—to fill a bucket was too much to fit inside two girls’ stomachs.

Miyako began to think to herself while chewing on the fish. *Stone-heated stew... Stone-heated. Heated stone, water. Heated stone, water, and boiling... A bath!*

“Fuuka-chan! We might actually be able to build a bath here!”

“What?”

“I know I’ll do a great job! I’ll do my best to get you to feel happy!”

Eager to put her idea into action, Miyako was completely unaware at the moment that her plan to use the heated stone to make a bath would cause an incident of sorts.

Nor did Fuuka know that a spy dispatched from the capital was trying to find their cabin.

Day 5, Morning: Leftover Stew and Water Spirits

He ran off. Literally, he was running on foot.

“Dammit, I’m *done* with this job! As soon as this business is over, I’m handing my notice in!!”

He kept running, out of breath. His destination: the Atika region.

“Shit, you could have at least given me a damn carriage!”

A capable spy, he’d discerned the whereabouts of Miyako and Fuuka immediately after receiving the order from his master Klaus Reinhardt, a capable idiot. When he’d reported that a carriage carrying them had made its way to the Atika region, the home of Miyako Florence’s family, his master gave him the following rather presumptuous order: “Go get her at once! She must be feeling terribly lonely without me!!”

That was an hour ago, in the dead of night.

“Who would actually think he really meant ‘at once’!!!”

Exhausted, the spy had been trying to go home for the first time in three days, when his caring master stopped him.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going? *Home*? What are you talking about? I told you to go to Atika to get her *at once*, did I not? Or maybe you’re playing some kind of joke?”

You’re the joke.

He had planned to hail a horse-drawn cab, but it must have been the busy season, as he had no luck. Therefore, he had no choice but to run all the way to Atika, a journey which took even quick carriages almost an entire day.

“Damn it all! What are you playing at, *Miyako*?!”

His name was Odina. Odina Florence. Yes, he was the older brother of Miyako Florence, the woman who ran away with Fuuka Hamilton the moment she had her engagement canceled by Klaus Reinhardt.

“Finished!”

“What is it? A pitfall?”

There was a hole dug in the garden with roundish stones blanketing the inside. It didn’t look like a pitfall. In fact, it was a...

“Guess what, it’s a Handmade Miyako Deluxe Open-Air Bath!”

“It’s a *bath*? This thing?”

Fuuka cocked her head in puzzlement. Nobody would blame her. It would be a fool’s errand to bring enough hot water here and put it in still warm. Besides, the water would cool right down while being transported.

“Heh heh, I got the idea from the stew you made... Look here!”

Miyako pulled out one of the heated stones.

So this is why you had a fire going in the corner of the garden, thought Fuuka.

“If we lob a few of these hot stones into the water in the hole...”

“Ah! It’ll warm it up?”

“Bingo!”

I see. If we do that, then every time the water begins to cool down we can just put another hot stone in, and the water will keep its warmth. So we won’t need to keep going all the way to the hot spring. The evenings can be quite chilly, so I’d be grateful for that, except...

“There’s just one thing, Miyako.”

“What’s that, Fuuka-chan?”

“How do we get the water in here in the first place?”

“...Ah.”

Whoops, thought Miyako.

They were mainly boiling well water when they needed it for cooking or drinking, but it would be back-breaking to carry this much here.

“Rainwater?”

“And how many days do you expect me to go without a bath?”

The Atika region had a lot of snowfall in the winter, but not nearly as much rainfall in the summer. By the time this hole filled with water, it would likely be home to pondlife. Not an appealing outcome.

“Wh-What do we do?”

“How should I know?”

She’s right, thought Miyako, burying her face in her hands. She’d spent the entire day digging the hole with dreams of a home with a bath, but the end result was just a random hole in the garden. *Fuuka-chan looked unquestionably happy whenever she got in the open-air bath, so I was sure she’d be overjoyed if the cabin had one too, but...*

Ever since Miyako was a wage slave, she’d had the feeling she was doomed to have everything she tried turn out wrong, leaving her with even more work. Since coming here, she’d managed to avoid unpleasant situations by employing her knowledge of the game’s scenarios as a kind of precognition, but...

“S-Sorry, Fuuka-chan...”

“I-I’m not particularly bothered.”

Miyako felt choked up.

“Um... Such a pity,” said Fuuka.

Uwaaa, don’t try to console me. You’re making me cry!

As Miyako sniffled... *Clank clank clank!*

“Wh-What was that noise?!”

“It came from inside the house... Could it be, have they found us?!”

The only other person who should have been coming in and out of this cabin was the girl—or rather, the mature woman—Shan Li the merchant, and they had bought her silence. *If they’ve caught up to us, we need to get away. Otherwise my plan to enjoy my two-week (and preferably longer) vacation with Fuuka-chan will be ruined!*

“I’ll go take a look!” said Miyako.

She rushed into the kitchen. A bucket had been knocked over. It was the one they had used to store the leftover stew from yesterday to have again for their lunch. The fish stew was all over the fl—*Wait, no it isn’t. How can that be? That’s where the leftovers should be. So where have they gone?*

“I-Is somebody there?!” called out Miyako, nervously.

“*Unyaa*,” came an unfamiliar voice. It sounded like that of a little girl.

Has a lost child wandered in here?

“Who’s there?”

“Who am I, you ask? What utter disrespect.”

There was a thud as something jumped onto the table... It was a cat.

“A stray cat?”

“*Nyaa*, the height of disrespect!”

The meowing cat was somehow... odd. *I’ve never seen fur that blue, the color of water. And she’s got something like a fin on her back made from water... no, from slime. And her shaking tail is—*

“A snake!” screamed Miyako.

—*a snake.*

Miyako, who had never been good with snakes, jumped away.

“What’s wrong, Miyako?!”

“Fuuka-chan! There’s some weird cat snake slime thing!”

“Do nyot address me with such a peculiar nyame, fool.”

The Cat Snake Slime Thing pricked up her snake-like tail and glared at Miyako.

What the hell is this creature?

“Wait, could this be...” Fuuka gasped. “A water spirit, an Undine?!”

“An Undine?”

“It’s one of the highest classes of spirits. I’ve only ever seen them in field guides...” said Fuuka, flustered.

Water spirits were one of the four kinds of great spirit: earth, air, water, and fire. They rarely showed themselves to humans, and nobody knew where they lived. They were creatures that every summoner and tamer dreamed of controlling, possessing incredibly rare and immensely powerful magical abilities. *Why is something like that in this tiny cabin?*

“Nyahaha, it appears you know what you’re talking about. Indeed, I am one of the Undine, what you call water spirits.”

“Cat Snake Slime Thing.”

“What did I say?! That’s not what I am!” exclaimed the Undine in anger at Miyako’s naming sense.

Something was stuck to the corner of her mouth.

“...Ah, our stew!”

“*Nyaa?*”

To summarize the story told by the Undine who devoured Miyako and Fuuka’s lunch:

“So in this garden, there was a shrine dedicated to you. You were sealed here as a water god... The passing years weathered the shrine away and buried it in the earth, until—”

“Until Miyako dug it up?”

The Undine nodded.

“Exactly.”

“And when you ate our stew, you found it surprisingly tasty, so...”

“...So you want to form a contract with us?” finished Fuuka.

“Eeeexactly! You must feel grateful?”

“If you’re a water spirit, does that mean you could fill the hole in our garden up with water?”

“It would be a trivial matter for me.”

“I’d love that!”

“Wait a minute, Miyako! Making a contract with an Undine is a state-level endeavor! Doing that for *just a bath...*”

“Baths are important too!”

“Besides, why in the world was an Undine buried in your garden?!”

“...Ah.”

“Ah?”

Miyako suddenly remembered the dream she had last night. In the dream, she was digging a hole, when hot water and oil came flooding out. She ignored it because she figured it was the same as the dreams she would have as a wage slave. In those, oil sprang up from her

house's garden, turning her into a millionaire, but...

“So this is what that was about?”

In any case, Miyako dug a hole in the garden and ended up forming a contract with an Undine.

So basically...

“Our quality of life just shot up!”

Day 5, Noon: A Personal-Use Bath and a Name for the Cat

The Undine yawned. The ground beneath her instantly trembled. Not a moment later...

“W-Wooow...”

“Th-That’s an Undine for you.”

Water filled the hole Miyako had spent the day digging. Slight waves spilled over the top. The Undine brought forth cool water from thin air with a single yawn. It was just one of the rare and powerful abilities available to Undines.

Now I just need to get a few hot stones in there, and the bath is finished. This is the best; I can share a bath with Fuuka-chan any time I want.

“Haha, hahaha, I’m so happy... Thank you, Undine.”

“Nyo, please, it was nyothing.”

The cat-shaped water spirit Undine wagged her snake-like tail and rolled onto her back.

Miyako took a good look at the aqua-blue seal engraved on the palm of her hand. The seal was the proof of her contract with the Undine. It had appeared before her eyes when the cat-shaped water spirit licked her hand.

“It’s my thanks for digging me out of the earth. Instead of a pet cat, I’ll be your pet Undine for as long as you live in this world.”

“Th-Thanks...”

Being from another world, Miyako had trouble grasping the reality of this situation. But shooting a glance at Fuuka, who had gone deathly pale and was trembling as she rushed through the pages of a book about water spirits (it looked to be a guidebook from the cabinet in the cabin), she got the feeling this was...

“This is... pretty extraordinary?”

“Only a handful of people each generation manage to form a contract with a spirit. I can’t believe this is happening as an *afterthought* to making a bath...”

“Nyahaha, that girl has the more nyormal reaction. How booring.”

“She’s not ‘that girl.’ She’s Fuuka-chan.”

“Hmph. Fuuka.”

“That’s it. She’s important to me, so make sure you call her by her

name.”

“I see. Understood. My apologies, Fuuka.”

“And one more thing, if you don’t mind...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Can you do something about that tail?”

That tail. The tail Miyako was trying her utmost to keep out of her sight. It was a writhing snake. *I hate snakes*, thought Miyako.

“Hmm, I thought it looked quite cool.”

“Yeah, sorry... It’s a bit much for me.”

“Very well. I am a water spirit with nyo fixed form. I’ll change my form however you like, but...”

“Yeah?”

The Undine cocked her head.

“Miyako, Fuuka. The two of you have nyames... I would like for you to give me one too.”

“What??!!” Fuuka screamed in surprise. “Naming a spirit... That’s the highest form of contract; don’t you know that?! In terms of the summoning arts, when you give a spirit a name, that name defines it. It’s a method to take complete control over the spirit. This is much more than just a contract...”

“I said I want one. Stop being so annoying.”

The Undine jerked her face away from Fuuka, at which Miyako snapped angrily, “That’s no way to behave!!!”

In her world, Miyako was the oldest of her siblings, and she acted the part.

“Make it a good nyame.”

“Hmm.”

Miyako turned to the nearby tree stump on which the Undine was sitting, and took in the sight (excluding, if she could help it, the tail).

The shape of a cat. A semi-translucent water-like body. A sort of jewel buried in her forehead; it’s pretty. Something like a fish’s fin on her back. And a snake for a tail.

“...How about Vaporeon?”

“I can’t say for sure, but it feels like that *infringes* upon something, so I’ll reject it.”

Miyako was a child of the P*kémon age.

“How does Un*gi-Inu sound?”

“Do I look like a dog to you? And what’s an ‘unagi’ anyway?”

Miyako had a deep knowledge of retro anime.

“Hmm, cat-shaped and with a pretty aqua-blue color... The most famous blue cat-like thing I know is...”

“I have a bad feeling about this...”

“Doraem*n!”

“That’s definitely infringing on something!!”

Miyako was a fan of her nation's favorite anime.

"Uhh, well then... Umi!"

"*Umi.*"

At Miyako's suggestion, the Undine and Fuuka tilted their heads in sync.

"Yeah. Since you're a water spirit, and your body's color kinda reminds me of the sea."

Miyako remembered the sea in Okinawa, where she'd gone for a graduation trip before she became a wage slave doomed to die from exhaustion.

"Nyahaha! I see, so you're nyaming me after the sea!!" The Undine laughed delightedly. "Very well, I'll take that nyame with pleasure! From today on, my nyame is Umi."

The Undine's body flickered and shook.

"A kitty cat!"

Miyako's face lit up.

A Persian cat with shining fur sat before them. She still had a jewel in her forehead, but other than that she was much more clearly a cat than the previous form, which had looked cat-like but was obviously something else. Fluffy and cuddly, with bright shining fur.

"Look, I have padded paws too."

"You're a genius!!!"

Yahooo! Padded paws for the win!!

While Miyako was jumping for joy, behind her Fuuka was trembling. *Is she not good with cats? Or maybe we've been messing around too much for her.*

"Fuuka-chan? Sorry, I went and..."

Miyako resolved to have Umi change forms again if Fuuka didn't like this one. But...

"She's so cuuuuute!!!" said Fuuka.

Her beautiful eyes glistened with excitement. It was the most excited she had sounded since they'd come here.

"So... you like it?"

"*Ahem.* It's not *awful*. I wasn't able to keep a cat at my mansion, even though I wanted to, because it would have been bad for my younger sisters' health, as you can imagine. And it's no business of mine what form you make the spirit you have a contract with take. After all, by next week we won't be together anymore!"

Fuuka rushed the words out, and then dropped her eyes to the floor.

Miyako knew that Fuuka actually loved animals, but despite that, her family had stripped away everything except what was necessary for a political marriage.

"I'm nyot a cat, I'm Umi," said Umi, clearing her throat.

“Heh heh, okay. As long as you’re okay with it, I’m glad,” said Miyako, smiling. “It’s always been my dream to have a cat and live a laid-back life. It feels sorta like a more refined way to live, when you have a cat.”

Miyako’s landlord had a no-pets-allowed policy.

“I’m nyot a cat, I’m Umi!”

Umi tilted her head and pricked her ears to attention.

“Someone’s here.”

“F-F-Fuuka!”

It was a familiar voice.

It was around noon, so it was Shan Li, the traveling merchant from the continent who always came by a little after noon.

“Shan Li-san?”

“Ah, Fuuka! I hear you practice white magic!!”

The usually haughty Shan Li ran inside, out of breath.

“Wh-Whatever’s the matter?!”

“Please, I need your help. Don’t ask any questions!!”

Clearly, unusual events lay ahead.

Day 5, Evening: Miasmal Autointoxication and the Traveling Merchant's Daughter

They piled into Shan Li's wagon and found themselves in a village packed with other carriages. On Miyako's shoulder sat Umi, now completely transformed into an ordinary cat. On the way, several villagers shot curious glances at the two unfamiliar girls, but Shan Li paid them no mind and drove the wagon onwards.

The evening sky was growing dark by the time they reached their destination.

"Okay, we're almost there!"

Shan Li's usual demeanor of a friendly traveling merchant was gone. She was panicking.

The wagon stopped in front of an ordinary-looking house.

"Whose house is this?"

"It's mine," said Shan Li.

"It looks quite normal. I imagined it would be—"

"You thought it would look more Continental? Or maybe you thought it would be more grand?" Seeing that the two of them were at a loss for words, Shan Li smiled like a cat. But her expression lacked her usual confidence. "Normal's best. If you stick out from the crowd, people get the idea that you're loaded, and nothing good comes from that," said the young girl—*er, the thirty-year-old skilled traveling merchant.*

That's probably her own brand of worldly wisdom, thought Miyako.

"All right, in here!"

Shan Li led them to a room on the second floor, probably a bedroom. Before even going in they could make out the sound of someone coughing violently.

Umi's ears sprang up at the noise.

"I sense a plague... Miyako, Fuuka, keep away from it!"

"Uh, okay?" said Miyako.

Shan Li didn't react to the young girl-sounding voice. It seemed as though she couldn't hear Umi.

"Only my master and her family can hear my voice."

"F-Family..."

Miyako blushed.

“Here goes... Nyaha!”

Umi shook her tail.

“Is this... Protect?!”

“Whoa, I feel a lot more energetic somehow.”

Sparkling blue light emanating from Umi’s tail filled the air like snow. When Miyako breathed it in, she felt more energetic, or perhaps that the light purified her body in some way.

“Hmm? So you can cast Protect? You really can do white magic. That should stop it from spreading at least a little,” said Shan Li.

“Huh? Oh, *ahem*, of course!” said Fuuka.

Shan Li assumed that Fuuka had used white magic, and Fuuka quickly played along.

“I’ll leave it to you, my white mage.”

Shan Li said that, then opened the door. Inside was a girl. She lay sprawled on a bed, deathly thin. Her sunken eyes turned to look at them, but there was no light behind them. The coughs she retched out one after another sounded very painful.

“This is...”

As soon as she saw the state the girl was in, Fuuka appeared to be thinking.

“Excuse me, Shan Li-san. Who is this girl?”

“She’s my daughter. I’m one of those working single mothers. She started feeling bad late last night, and she’s not gotten any better! The doctors don’t have a clue what it is!”

“I see...”

Fuuka lost herself in thought. *I expect Shan Li remembered me saying a few days ago that white magic was the choice of girls from noble families.*

White magic was a subdivision of the magic arts that focused on healing, enhancement, and making tools and medicines. The legendary sorceress Laplace, Youngest Daughter of the Dragon and one of the first mages, established a branch of the arcane arts based around attacks and weakening enemies, and this became known simply as “magic.” On the other hand, the arcane arts that descended from the magic Our Blessed Lady of the Springs preferred were, for reasons of convenience, called “white magic.” Those who narrowed their focus of white magic to just healing and built their repertoire there were called “healers.”

Society viewed the manufacture of medicines as the pastime of young, noble ladies in particular. *But for a disease like this, wouldn’t it be best to call for a renowned white mage or healer from the capital?*

At the level of a lady’s hobby, it was possible to deal with the slight injuries that took place at home, or someone who felt generally unwell. A disease like this that kept the girl in front of them pinned to

her bed was usually outside the scope of that sort of white magic.

“This is...”

“*Argh*, stay back. *Stay back!*”

As Fuuka approached, the girl began writhing in pain.

“Come on! This lady is a white mage!! Behave yourself!!!”

“It’s all right, Shan Li-san! That’s one of the symptoms of the disease.”

After Fuuka hurried to quell the misunderstanding, Shan Li calmed down.

Fuuka took a few steps back, and the girl’s breathing calmed down.

Miyako was out of her depth, and could do nothing but watch and hold Umi in her arms.

Fuuka pondered something for a little while, before turning to Umi and whispering quietly, “Umi-san, please dispel the Protect spell you cast on me.”

“Nya? Have you lost your mind? It might be infectious!”

“I know that, but there’s something I’d like to check.”

Faced with a threatening look from Fuuka, Umi let out a sigh. At the same time, the veil of blue light covering Fuuka faded away.

Fuuka walked towards the bed. This time, Shan Li’s daughter showed no signs of being in pain.

Miyako held her breath and kept watching.

“Fuuka-chan...”

Miyako had noticed—or rather, she knew—that Fuuka had a stronger sense of responsibility and was kinder than anyone else. Fuuka could never give up on a sick child.

“...This feeling.”

Fuuka brushed her hand against the girl’s forehead.

“This cloudiness in the eyes.”

Next, her eyelids.

“And this smell...”

Fuuka took a sniff.

“Umi-san, can you cast Protect on me again?”

“Nyaa.”

A blue light once more shrouded Fuuka. The mighty water spirit cast with a single flick of her bushy tail a spell that a human would need a long chant to replicate.

Fuuka chose her words carefully in conveying her thought process to Shan Li, who was watching the scene with worry.

“I only have eight books on medicine memorized, but—”

“Fu-Fuuka-chan, you really do go the extra mile with your studies...”

“But this is definitely miasmal autointoxication. It’s a magical

ailment where poisonous magic—that is, miasma—starts to build up inside the body,” explained Fuuka matter-of-factly.

This disease was troublesome because the miasma built up from inside the body, and applying healing magic would have no effect. In fact, quite the opposite: the blessing from the healing magic would inflict damage on the body. If it were a normal disease, they could use the Undine’s water-affinity healing magic to cure it there and then. *But since all it took was someone cloaked in the Protect spell approaching her for her to start writhing in pain...*

“The disease is likely quite progressed... At this rate, I’m afraid your daughter won’t make it.”

“That can’t be!!”

“She might not even have until tomorrow morning.”

“Th-The doctor never said anything like that!”

“It’s an exceedingly rare case, so there is a possibility that my diagnosis is mistaken... But if I’m right there’s only one way to treat it.”

“Ah!” Miyako realized what that might be. “Moonlight grass?”

Fuuka nodded.

Moonlight grass. A tremendously rare alpine plant, said to work against all diseases. According to Fuuka, only moonlight grass had an effect on miasmal autointoxication.

“There was some moonlight grass on the mountain roads, on the way to the hot spring!”

Miyako and Fuuka nodded in mutual understanding.

Shan Li clasped her small hands together and looked at the two of them.

She can be a little forceful, but she’s always cheerful and brings us tasty things to eat, this traveling merchant from the Continent. There’s no way we can let her down, no matter what.

“Shan Li-san, please bring the wagon out!”

No one would deny the nighttime mountain roads were terrifying. The girls might even run into monsters. Even so, Miyako grabbed Fuuka by the hand and set off.

Day 5, Night: Adventure by Night and Moonlight Grass

The wagon raced through the darkness. Miyako held the reins, while Fuuka sat in the passenger's seat.

"Is this really all right, Miyako?!"

"Is-Is-Is-Is what all right?!"

"Have you ever driven one of these before?!"

"Nope!"

"What?!"

"Well, it wouldn't have been right to make Shan Li-san drive us...!"

While her only daughter was suffering, Shan Li had tried to get in the wagon herself, but Miyako volunteered to drive instead. She had ridden her share of horses, but when it came to wagons—*Well, I'm sure I'll get the hang of it.*

Since coming here from the world where she was a wage slave, Miyako decided she would be positive to a fault. She would rather regret doing something than regret not doing it. That's why she decided no matter what to save Fuuka, the villainess who put in a ridiculous amount of work, and make her happy. She'd endured unreasonable abuse from her father and her younger sisters for the sake of her family, her honor, and the chance at a good marriage.

"Fuuka-chan, we should be almost there!"

Miyako sped up the wagon even more.

"My master has a peculiar taste in people," said Umi with a yawn from inside the empty wagon.

"It looks like we'll have to walk the rest of the way," said Fuuka.

After making it to the beginning of the mountain road, Fuuka descended from the wagon holding a lantern in one hand. The path from there onwards was too narrow for the wagon to traverse.

This trip felt completely different than their midday treks to the secluded spring. The night air was cold. Even the firm ground somehow felt chilly. The lantern only illuminated a part of the nighttime scenery.

Miyako huddled close to Fuuka.

“It’s okay... The moonlight grass grows near the stream. It’s not *that* far away,” said Miyako.

“Yes, that’s right. We’ve been coming here for days, and there’s only the one path... Everything should go perfectly fine!”

Miyako tightly gripped Fuuka’s hand, which was drenched in sweat and ice cold. *She’s scared. But despite that, Fuuka-chan’s bravely pressing on and trying to save Shan Li’s daughter. She’s so kind-hearted.*

“Is something the matter, Miyako?”

Miyako had been unconsciously staring in admiration at Fuuka’s face.

I love how she prioritizes others over herself, thought Miyako. I love how she does that without hesitation. I love that she’s way more easily embarrassed than I thought she was. And I love how she’s so, so kind.

“It’s nothing. Let’s go, Fuuka-chan. You too, Umi!”

And so, they ran through the darkness, with Fuuka holding a lantern in one hand, Miyako holding the cat-shaped Umi with one of hers, and each of their remaining hands clasped tight around the other’s.

Their footsteps echoed as they walked without speaking. They heard the cries of far-off mountain birds, and the howling of wolves.

“...Was it always this far away?”

“Yeah... when we go to the hot spring, I always have so much fun talking to you that we get there before I know it.”

They spoke in hushed tones, huddling together as they walked. Occasionally there was a rustling in the nearby thickets. Each time that happened, Fuuka shrieked and stiffened up.

“I-It’s okay! If it comes to it, I’ll fend off anything for you!”

“Do you know how to use magic? Or maybe swordcraft?”

“Uh, I... Just don’t worry, anyway.”

“Nyaa, might it be that my master couldn’t even best a lone nyight bandit??”

“I don’t think there are many girls who could, Umi.”

“How boring, I’d love to see you win in a hand-to-hand fight.”

“Haha.”

Umi wagged her tail in dissatisfaction and spoke in a carefree tone unbecoming of the situation, and Fuuka inadvertently burst out laughing. Umi, together with Miyako’s forced bravado, eased her spirit.

Just then, they noticed the ground in front of them was glowing.

“That light! There’s no doubt about it. It’s exactly the same as the moonlight grass I saw in the field guide.”

“We made it!”

By the side of the stream, a little distance from the maintained path, moonlight grass grew in droves.

"If I remember correctly, I saw some other medicinal herbs growing here too!"

"Ah, Fuuka-chan, be careful!"

Miyako hurried after Fuuka as she descended a steep slope without paying attention to her surroundings. It wouldn't be much of a fall, but it could still cause an injury if she slipped.

"I'm all right. Keep watch there, Miyako, and make sure there's nothing dangerous around us."

"O-Okay."

Fuuka nimbly descended the slope, then plucked the moonlight grass with a deft hand. The delicate, omnipotent spiritual herb was said to have a greater effect on nights lit by the moon.

Fuuka looked up to the sky. She could see a full moon from between the gaps in the dense covering of branches. *I'm sure that on a night like this, the moonlight grass will lend us its power and save Shan Li's daughter.*

Fuuka placed the moonlight grass into a pouch, then she gathered a few of the other medicinal herbs growing in the area which she thought might be useful. The ones whose roots she could use, she pulled out entirely. For the ones whose leaves she could use, she cut the leaves off with a small pair of scissors. This place by the stream was a treasure trove of medicines, undiscovered until now because few passed through here.

Fuuka packed more and more herbs into the pouch, in a well-practiced motion. She'd always felt her home was only a place for training, where she could never let her mind wander. The only exception was the small veranda where she kept the medicinal herbs she grew herself. The experience she gained tending to the herbs there while practicing white magic was paying off now.

"This should be enough...!"

She picked up the lantern she'd placed on the ground and made her way back up the slope. Miyako watched from above with a worried expression.

"F-Fuuka-chan, are you all right?"

"Everything's fine. Let's hurry back and mix these... A-Aaaah?!"

"Fuuka-chan?!?"

Fuuka suddenly vanished from Miyako's sight, making her scream.

Oh my God, no way, are you okay, my darling Fuuka-chan?!

"I'm... all right."

Fuuka had lost her footing in the mud on the slope and slipped, but she managed to pull herself upright again. The magical lantern was somehow unscathed, and the flame inside, powered by magic,

continued to burn. Fuuka herself didn't appear to have any notable injuries.

"Okay, Miyako. Let's go, quickly now!"

"Sure! I just know Shan Li-san's daughter will be fine."

"Of course! Who do you think I am? I'll definitely make everything right."

The corners of Fuuka's mouth perked up in a smile.

"After all, I'm the daughter of Count Hamilton of the proud Hamilton family!"

Miyako couldn't stop herself from hugging Fuuka.

"Fuuka-chan!"

"I, wait, Miyako?! Now's not the time..."

"Yeah, I know! But, you know, I want to tell you something."

"...Yes?"

Miyako whispered into Fuuka's attractive ear. She whispered with care, as though she were handing over a precious treasure. "Even if you weren't a Hamilton, no matter who you were... I think I'd still have fallen in love with you."

"You!! I, wha-!!"

Miyako couldn't see Fuuka's face in the dark, but...

"L-L-Let's hurry back, Miyako!!"

"Okay!"

But Fuuka's ears, entrusted with this treasure, were burning a fierce red.

Watching all of that was the fluffy Undine.

"Nyaa, how *hot*."

"Hold on, Umi!!" shouted Fuuka.

"Ah, I completely forgot about Umi!"

The two of them raced back down the road they'd come from, screeching with embarrassment.

They trekked back along the mountain path, hand in hand.

Day 6, Before Dawn: Wagon Thieves and the Awakened Water Spirit

“This can’t be happening!!” Miyako shrieked after they’d made it back along the mountain path.

They had raced down the night roads in the wagon, made their way across the dark mountain, and deftly acquired the rare panacea, moonlight grass. If they could just hurry back along the way they came, they could save the girl suffering from the frightful disease miasmal autointoxication. But...

“The wagon is... gone.” said Fuuka.

There was no trace of the wagon they rode in on.

“Do you think it was mountain bandits?”

“Whatever the reason is... how are we going to get back to Shan Li-san’s house?”

It was a several-hour journey by wagon. It was already the dead of night. They might reach Shan Li’s house a little after midday if they walked. But if they did that, they wouldn’t make it in time. Miasmal autointoxication would kill the girl first.

“What should we...”

Miyako bit her lip. *I guess I was being a bit arrogant, thinking I knew more about the world than Fuuka-chan, thinking I could protect her. The truth is I didn’t even consider the possibility the wagon might get stolen like this. I’m a total failure. But, even so, I’m not giving up no matter what.* Miyako wanted to do her best to support Fuuka, whose eyes were welling up with tears of shock and confusion, who’d come all this way, determined to save that girl.

“Nyaa.”

Just then, the fluffy cat cried out from inside Miyako’s arms.

“Umi?”

“I wonder, why is my master fretting over the loss of a mere wagon?”

Miyako felt Umi’s warmth gently vanish from her arms. A moment later, Umi, the fluffy Persian cat, was sitting on the ground in front of them. A cool aqua blue light shrouded her body, just as when she cast the water-type spell Protect in Shan Li’s house.

“Umi?”

“I *am* grateful to you for freeing me. I’m a water spirit of this land, and you, Miyako, are my master. So, all you have to do is command

me in your name... Nyame?"

"Did you just force a 'nya' in there?"

"Nyaha, characterization is important," laughed Umi.

Miyako took a deep breath. *She's gonna help us?*

"Miyako, even the best summoners think twice before giving a direct order to a spirit!"

"But... I trust Umi!"

Miyako clenched down on Fuuka's hand. She shut her eyes, and filled her lungs. When her mind cleared, the words sprang out by themselves.

"O Undine of the cool waters, abide by our contract and unleash thy power. My name is Miyako. As thou art the one I have named Umi!"

"Thy wish is my command. My name is Umi. As thou art the one who singest of the blue waters of the abyss!"

In an instant, Umi's soft fur glowed a dazzling blue, which swelled up in a vortex of light.

"Wh-Whoa?!" exclaimed Miyako, while Fuuka screamed.

Miyako and Fuuka instinctively drew close to each other, and when they next opened their eyes, what stood before them was a magnificent mythical beast, seemingly formed of nothing but cool water. Several times the size of Miyako, the creature was big and beautiful.

"A-Amazing."

"Nyahaha, quite the show, I imagine?"

"How divine. Is this your true form as an Undine...?"

"Nyot quite. We do nyot have 'true forms,' so to speak. This is the form Miyako wished for me to have."

"I did?!"

Miyako was taken aback. *I never knew my heart was capable of imagining something so beautiful... Who knew the dorky teenager in me was still alive and well? I thought I'd lost her in my days spent toiling away as a wage slave.*

The sight of Umi's new form right in front of her thrilled her to no end.

"...This is amazing." Even Fuuka's voice trembled at the spectacle before her. Her hand was grasping Miyako's, damp with sweat. *But, oddly, I don't mind.*

"Nyow then, my masters," Umi announced, twitching her beautiful whiskers. "Get on my back, and let's run through the night. I'm sure I'll give you a comfy ride. It'll feel just like floating down a stream."

Shan Li stood glaring out the window. Her beloved daughter's breathing from the bed where she lay sounded pained, and it gradually grew weaker. Shan Li couldn't bear to listen to her agonized groans.

It doesn't look like she has much time left.

Although the traveling merchant from the Continent didn't look any older than fifteen, the expression on Shan Li's face was filled with a mother's anguish.

Thinking back on it, I've put my girl through a lot. She's never known her father. I followed a business opportunity all the way to Pajan before she could even talk. At one point we didn't even have a place to call home. There must have been times where she felt lonely; I was always off working.

And yet, she still grew up to be a healthy, kind-hearted girl. If I could have just been here by her side, I might have noticed something was wrong sooner.

Regrets of that sort swelled inside Shan Li's mind. But all she could do was trust in Miyako and Fuuka, and wait. Trust in those eccentric girls who one day out of the blue moved into that cabin, far from the village. *Maybe it was God's providence that I met them.*

"Please, make it in time," whispered Shan Li, as though praying, while she stared out the window.

In the brightening sky Shan Li caught sight of a shooting star.

No. Something was slicing through the heavens, shrouded in light as blue as the sea.

As the light grew larger, Shan Li saw it for what it was. She gasped.

A beautiful beast was charging across the sky, carrying two young girls on its back. It reminded her of the fairy tales she heard as a child.

"Ah, everything's gonna be all right..."

As the girls came back, riding a falling star, Shan Li wished a blessing for them in her native tongue.

Day 6, Morning: The Morning Square and the Villainess

The early morning breeze was cool, and the sun lit the sky blue and orange. Fuuka sat absentmindedly on a bench in the village square.

Miyako ran up to her and called out, “Fuuka-chan.”

Umi lay sleeping, curled up on Fuuka’s lap. She had already discarded the beautiful divine beast figure in favor of the cuddly Persian cat form she’d taken when she formed her contract with Miyako. *Looking at her like this, she really does look like just a cat... More to the point, who knew spirits slept?*

“Miyako, has Shan Li-san calmed down yet?”

“Yeah, just about.”

Miyako chuckled to herself.

The moonlight grass took effect immediately. They gave it to Shan Li’s daughter, mixed with medicines as prescribed by the medicinal textbook Fuuka had memorized, and her condition improved. Once they had overcome the fatal situation of miasma building up in her body, all they had to do to finish the treatment was cast the white magic spell Heal on her, enhanced with Umi’s Protect spell.

Shan Li burst into tears upon seeing her daughter go straight from being barely conscious to being able to speak clearly. Fuuka’s skill in medicine especially moved Shan Li. It appeared Fuuka would not be able to escape her torrent of compliments as long as she remained in that room, so Miyako had stayed with Shan Li by herself instead.

“Her daughter seems better now too.”

“Yep. It’s all thanks to you, Fuuka-chan. Shan Li-san said she wants to throw a party for you as thanks. The full ‘Continental treatment,’ apparently.”

“There’s no need for her to thank me...” said Fuuka, but she couldn’t help but smile. Smitten by that lovely sight, Miyako found herself feeling happy too.

“Um, Miyako.”

“What’s up?”

“I was able to help Shan Li-san, wasn’t I?”

“Yeah, of course!”

“And she was... pleased, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah, she was super pleased. She’s so grateful to you! She said

she owes her life to you.”

“Grateful... Her life...”

Fuuka felt her chest warm up, and her heart pound. She had always worked so hard to be the best, the most beautiful. But to her, that was never anything more than duty. Her father, younger sisters, and everyone viewed Fuuka’s efforts and excellence as something “obvious” as well.

Nobody ever praised her. Nobody ever thanked her. The only one who had ever complimented her hard work was Miyako, who was supposed to be her rival, someone to contend with in the fight for a fiancé. As the eldest daughter of the Hamilton family, there was no way she could accept compliments from a rival at face value.

So this might be the first time in my life that someone’s really thanked me, taken notice of me. I never knew hearing the words “thank you” could feel so—

“Being thanked feels so warm, I feel...” said Fuuka. *Yes, so very...*
“I feel so ha—”

Miyako’s face lit up in expectation, but Fuuka got a hold of herself. The promise they’d made flitted through Fuuka’s mind. *If Miyako can make me say I’m happy in these two weeks, I’ll stay with her instead of returning home.* That was the promise they made on the first day of their runaway escapade.

“Fuuka-chan! Go on, you feel ‘ha...’”

“Ha-Ha... Harried!!! I feel harried after you had me out all night looking for herbs, not that I’m complaining!!”

Her face turned scarlet. She thrust her index finger out towards Miyako.

Miyako was taken aback by Fuuka’s reaction, but she soon broke out into a broad smile.

“So forceful! But I love that part of you too, Fuuka-chan!!”

“Miyako, stop with the hugs!” squealed Fuuka.

“It’s all right, nobody’s watching!”

Their voices echoed across the square lit by the morning sun. As the villainess smiled from ear to ear, the fluffy Undine on her lap let out a large yawn.

Day 8, Noon: Fuuka the Saint and the Visitor

As Shan Li was still looking after her beloved daughter and couldn't leave her house, starting the day after they'd picked the herbs, a stand-in for her began to visit the cabin. At midday the stand-in brought courteous letters, as well as extravagant catering.

The package included steamed rice wrapped in large leaves, gently boiled whole-chicken soup, among other things. They had all the food they could want. *This is great. Another quality-of-life bump!!*

Apparently Shan Li, the skilled merchant from the Continent, had sworn on her reputation to prepare it all for them... *But I think it might be a bit much for the two of us. And by might, I mean definitely.*

When they left Shan Li's house, she had tried to give them quite a large sum of money as thanks, but Fuuka stubbornly refused, saying, "As a lady of the Hamilton family, I can't accept this." That was the cause of this onslaught of food.

"Ugh, I can't eat any more!"

"Neither can I..."

"Hey, Fuuka-chan, do you think we should share this?"

"Share it? What do you mean?" Fuuka tilted her head. The villainess had no knowledge of the concept of sharing food.

Well, I should have guessed that.

"We take what we can't eat, and share it with other people."

"Hmm, that does make sense."

"We can give people soup to eat here, and if they're not hungry we can give them the steamed rice to take home."

"Well, if this morning is anything to go by, there will be quite a few people coming in the afternoon too..."

"Seems like it... I didn't think things would turn out like this."

Miyako looked off into the distance.

"I'm finding that being of help to others can be quite the kettle of fish."

"I know, Fuuka-chan. But..."

"What is it, Miyako?"

Miyako cupped her cheeks as they gave way to a smile.

"But you look so happy!"

I'm gonna live the slow life in the countryside with my beloved Fuuka-chan!... At least, that's what Miyako had planned. But since coming here, events were beginning to run a different course.

Specifically—

“Miyako-sama, Fuuka-sama, could I have some medicine?”

“I'm the man you gave some herbal medicines to yesterday. My son's gotten right over his cough!”

“So you two are the famous saints I'm hearing so much about!!”—like that.

In no time at all, the village was teeming with rumors of the tragic case of miasmal autointoxication that befell the local celebrity Shan Li's beloved daughter, and the two young ladies from the capital who sorted it out in a single night. Those rumors then spilled over to other nearby towns and villages.

Over the last few days, people had swarmed to the cabin asking for medicines.

“Fortunately, there's plenty of moonlight grass left,” said Fuuka, as she busied herself listening to descriptions of symptoms in silence and mixing herbs.

They refused all payments, asking only that no one tell anyone else the two of them were there.

“Nyahaha, medicines I've cast Protect on would normally be kept as national treasures, if I'm being honest.”

“My my, Umi. Thank you very much.”

“If you give me a good rub as thanks, I'll say we're even.”

“Oh, all right. Anyone would think you were a cat.”

Miyako gave Umi's back a nice petting, remembering when she used to do it with the cats at the cat café. Umi's fur trembled delightedly.

“Nyahaha, *there*, right there! *More!*”

“Uhh... Umi?”

“A-Ahem.”

She was a cat. A fluffy, Persian cat. *But hearing those delighted moans in a high-pitched girly voice is too much; it's just too much for me, you little water spirit!*

“Thank you, my saints!”

“I've *told* you before, we're not saints!”

That exchange heralded the last of the patients leaving around mid-afternoon. The cabin was a several-hour-long wagon ride from the neighboring villages, so they must all have left first thing in the morning to get there. It would be the dead of night by the time they made it home.

From what they couldn't finish from Shan Li's extravagant catering, Miyako and Fuuka took the steamed rice wrapped in leaves and gave it to the patients to take home with them.

"Sharing turned out to be a great success! Although it's more like a bento!"

"Bento?"

Fuuka cocked her head, puzzled.

Whoa, so cute!! Miyako just managed to keep her expression normal.

"A bento is food you take with you when you go out."

"So it's like catering?"

"Not really."

It's times like these that you can tell she's a rich girl, thought Miyako.
The natural-born rich girl a.k.a. my beloved villainess, Fuuka.

"Oh, I know, let's go for a picnic together sometime soon."

"A picnic... In whose honor?"

"In nobody's honor; a picnic for just the two of us!"

In Fuuka's experience, picnics were merely an extension of the high society enjoyed by nobles. To the organizing family, they were worry-filled events requiring months of desperate preparation to ensure nothing tarnished their good name. To the participants, picnics were golden opportunities to unfurl political ploys and lay the groundwork for strategic marriages. So picnics naturally entailed luxurious catering prepared by their chefs, and the aim was a banquet.

"Just for us..."

"Right. We'll have a great time, Fuuka-chan!" said Miyako in a sing-song voice as she warmed up the chicken soup. *Where should we go for the picnic? I'm pretty sure there's a well-known field of flowers near us. What should we put in our bento? Sandwiches are the standard. I used to make a mean egg sandwich. I haven't made any in a while though. I've been too busy to cook. There are six days left until the time limit is up. I wonder, will Fuuka tell me she's happy?*

"...Even if you don't."

"Hmm?"

"It's nothing."

Fuuka smiled.

Yeah. Even if she doesn't say "I'm happy," and this lifestyle comes to an end, as long as she looks back on these days as happy times, I think I might not mind. I do want to be by her side always. But even if I can't, as long as she's happy—

"You're weird, Miyako."

Fuuka let out a little laugh. *I really do love her smile,* thought Miyako.

Just then.

“Heeey! Is anyone here?”

“Huh, who’s that?!”

A voice rang out from outside the cabin. They could hear a horse neighing. Someone had arrived on a wagon. There was something that set this visitor apart from the others.

Umi’s ears pricked up, and she darted upright from the windowsill where she had been curled up. Miyako rushed to the door and threw it open.

She saw the figure standing there—and screamed.

“O-Odina??!!”

“Oh, so you *were* here after all, Miyako!!”

“Ah, isn’t that the wagon somebody stole the other day?!” said Fuuka.

Standing there was a lone man, who gallantly descended from the wagon that had vanished from the nighttime mountain path.

“You know him, Miyako?”

“Indeed, I am the eldest son of the Florence family, and Miyako’s older brother... Odina Florence.”

Odina was covered in mud and wearing an expression of utter fatigue. His eyes, drooping over pitch-black bags, began to narrow. That expression harbored the grief of an already exhausted man sent on another ridiculous errand by his master.

And then.

“By order of Klaus Reinhardt-sama, I have come to bring my sister...”

He slumped, and hit the ground with a loud *bang*.

“Odinaaaa!!”

Barely ten seconds after his arrival, Odina Florence collapsed from overwork.

Day 9: Useless Brothers and Plans for a Picnic

Odina Florence's younger sister, Miyako, left him to get a full night's sleep (on the floor in the living room) after he'd collapsed. She then prepared a warm meal for him. Along with the warm heated-stone-style bath and a little time spent taking it easy in the countryside—undisturbed by long hours of labor—he was brought to tears.

Viva Florence!

“Miyako, I think I'll go home for a while. I've had enough of being a workaholic!”

“Uh...”

You turn up out of nowhere and immediately spout that stuff like you don't have a care in the world! Actually, I'm more shocked that he's the one who stole our wagon on the mountain that night.

“Ah, I thought maybe someone had just abandoned it...” he said to Miyako's astonishment, scratching his head.

What amazed her most was that his method of travel from the capital to the Atika region had been sprinting. *Just how ripped is my brother?* Miyako shot a glance at Fuuka to find that she too was wide-eyed in amazement at Odina's matter-of-fact telling of his story. Odina Florence was the textbook “loveable idiot.”

“Well, I *will* have to report this to Klaus-sama, that being my job and all, but I'll skip work for a few days first. Keep your story straight with mine, Miyako!”

“Uh, sure... Watch your back, Odina.”

Miyako heard that Odina was working for the Reinhardt family in the capital, but she worried whether he was managing to cope with the workload. *I mean, I am grateful that he's not gonna get in the way of me living with Fuuka-chan, but...*

They took the wagon back from Odina since they'd borrowed it from Shan Li. Umi watched the horses with great interest as they happily munched their fodder. *Watching her swing her tail from side to side, you can tell she really is a cat.*

They saw off Odina as he departed into the dusk, now back in

high spirits. Miyako asked him to keep quiet to their family about using the spare home without permission. Seeing as he himself had no qualms about skiving off work, Odina didn't take much convincing. *Nothing beats having a half-assed but hard-working older brother.*

"That man makes others work like crazy since he has high specs, doesn't he?" asked Miyako.

"That man" was Miyako's former fiancé, the marquis Klaus Reinhardt. Even Count Hamilton's family obsessed over forging an engagement with Klaus. The Reinhardt family had a high pedigree, and Klaus showed zeal for his role as a knight in the royal court. However, a slight—or not so slight—inclination towards self-obsessed narcissism undermined him.

To be honest, I was only ever after Fuuka-chan, anyway. To be more honest, he was sooo off my radar that now I'm here, living with Fuuka-chan, and I don't even really remember his face that well. I think it looked all right... maybe.

"Since Klaus-sama sent someone after us, it's only a matter of time before he finds where we are," said Fuuka as she mixed medicines for villagers who would likely come the next day. She ground medicines in a mortar, using not only freshly picked herbs, but also those she'd dried out.

Watching from the side, Miyako thought of how much she preferred the Fuuka in front of her to the perfect, flawless villainess who dressed immaculately and acted like a puppet on strings in accordance with high-society etiquette.

So.

"Hmm, I don't want them to drag you away from here against your will. Actually, I just wanna be with you more!"

"There's no need to shout, Miyako."

"Ah, sorry. But I do want to sort something out before my brother comes to his senses."

"What do you mean?" Fuuka stopped grinding the medicines and stared at Miyako. "You don't actually believe we can keep running forever, do you?"

"I..."

Fuuka continued, "We can't. However hard we work, however hard we try, however much we do to live up to our fathers' expectations... we'll still just be *girls*."

"Fuuka-chan," said Miyako, "I *know* that the two of us can do it. We can live happily together, me and you."

"Nyaa, do you mean like two runaway lovers? I love those sorts of stories."

"And we've got Umi too."

"Miyako..."

Tears welled up in Fuuka's eyes.

The truth is, I have noticed. I really have enjoyed living with Miyako. The things I never knew about or did before are so exciting. It's so refreshing to take the white magic, which I studied for so long as "a lady's pastime," use it to save complete strangers, and have them thank me so much. It warms my heart to no end.

But because of that, I have no confidence about whether it's all right to continue having fun living like this, whether two women really even can enjoy a life together, whether Miyako bringing me here wasn't just a lapse in judgment for her.

All of that made Fuuka so uneasy that she couldn't even bring herself to say something so simple: that living with Miyako made her happy.

"Fuuka-chan!"

Seeing a depressed look on Fuuka's face, Miyako took her hands and spoke. There wasn't much time left to get her to say she was happy. Miyako didn't want to leave anything undone. She wanted to take everything that made Fuuka worry, and get rid of it all.

"Let's go for a picnic!" Miyako was determined to keep to all the plans they made together. "We'll make a bunch of delicious bento. And we'll take some nice tea with us and go see the pretty flower fields!"

"...Miyako."

"We'll have a picnic, not for anyone else but for us, for you, Fuuka-chan. I know we'll have a great time!"

Miyako's hands felt warm to Fuuka as they wrapped around hers. Looking at Miyako's desperate expression, Fuuka felt her cheeks warm up. *I know we'll have a great time. If Miyako says so, then I'm sure she's absolutely right.*

"...All right. So be it. Let's do it, the picnic."

Fuuka found it strange, yet comforting, that she could believe Miyako.

Day 10: Rain and Slumber

Miyako jumped out of bed and checked outside the window. And then, a sigh escaped her attractive lips.

“Raining again.”

“There’s no need to be so down in the dumps,” said Fuuka while running a brush through Miyako’s auburn hair.

“But I *wanted* to go on a picnic with you!!!”

“If you keep your cheeks puffed out like that, they’ll get stuck that way.”

“Hmph.”

Drops of rain struck the roof of their cabin. Umi had curled herself up in a corner of the cold room, near the stove that heated the water. As she yawned, there was no resemblance to a national treasure-level water spirit; instead, her attitude was indistinguishable from an ordinary cat.

“I can summon the rain, but I can’t make it stop,” she said in a low voice before curling up again.

Light showers had started the day before. Other than the non-stop rain, Miyako and Fuuka passed the time in peace. It seemed that Odina really had gone back to the Florence home to rest, keeping their presence a secret.

There were four days left to the promise. If Miyako couldn’t get Fuuka to say “I’m happy” within the next four days, this would all end. Miyako knew that Fuuka would stick precisely to the promise, which is why she wanted to follow through on their small plan of going for a picnic within that time.

“Ugh... so depressing.”

“Rainy days bring everyone’s mood down with them. It would be best not to let it get to you.”

“But now’s the perfect time of year... The field of flowers near here really is pretty. When we used to drive past in our carriage, it was so...”

Miyako felt her eyelids grow heavy. *I’ve only just eaten breakfast; I’m really not with it today*, she thought, but she couldn’t shake off her sleepiness.

“...Miyako?”

“Sorry, just feeling a bit sleepy.”

“You’re tired. Why don’t you go lie down on the bed?”

“Don’t wanna.” Miyako resisted the urge to sleep. *I want to spend every minute of these last few days with Fuuka-chan.* “I’ll go if you get in with me, Fuuka-chan.”

She half meant it as a joke. *I love Fuuka-chan. I wanna be with her more. I wanna hold her in my arms.* But the time limit was drawing closer, and before she knew it, the stress from that fact had built up inside her. *But Fuuka is only here for my selfish reasons, so however much I ask her to, there’s no way she’ll agree to sleep in the same bed as me.*

That’s what she thought, but...

“All right,” said Fuuka quietly.

“...Huh?!”

“You want us to sleep together, don’t you? I don’t mind,” she said. Her ears were burning red.

Umi yawned and jumped through the window to the outside. She ran a passing glance over the two of them as she left, as though she had taken a hint.

Miyako found it strange that even though her heart was racing, her irresistible sleepiness refused to go away.

They crawled beneath the covers, and the warmth of their bodies soon heated the bed.

Their morning slumber had the scent of flowers.

Her neck is so soft, her breasts so warm, her black hair so lustrous. Ah, but I’m so... tired...

Day 10, Afternoon: Raindrops and Farewell Letters

Miyako realized something when she woke up.

“...Fuuka-chan?”

It was something like a hunch. The covers, so warm earlier, now held only a single person’s warmth. The cabin was silent. That made it clear to Miyako.

Fuuka-chan’s gone.

Looking out the window, Miyako saw that it was well into the afternoon. *What happened to Shan Li’s stand-in? He was supposed to bring us tasty catering every day.*

“Fuuka-chan, where are you?!”

After having a quiet panic, Miyako shouted. She rushed into the kitchen. Atop the dining table was a sealed envelope with delicate handwriting on it. Miyako’s hands trembled as she picked the envelope up.

Inside was a letter from Fuuka. It was a parting letter, the customary way to say farewell.

Miyako read the contents in a frenzy.

Dear Miyako Florence,

I know ceremonious letters aren’t to your taste, so I’ll spare you the overly formal greetings.

Farewell.

I have thought everything over, in my own way.

My misadventures in cooking, my working in the field, my playing a doctor, these were all firsts for me. If I’m honest, they were so fun I thought I was dreaming. In all those days I spent tightrope walking in the capital as the “lady of the Hamilton family,” I never would have imagined this.

But, I’m sure that our time together was wrong.

So I thought I’d take the arrival of someone from the Reinhardt family as a good opportunity.

I’m returning to the capital.

There’s just no way that two women can enjoy life on their own, without the backing of their families or the help of men. At least, if

there is one, I don't know it.

Miyako, you are so very kind. I understand that now, after living with you. That's why you extended your hand to me, as pathetic as I am, someone who can't even find a husband.

That's how I feel. That's why, Miyako, I couldn't bear for you to become unhappy by living with me. Even if your "clairvoyance" shows you where I'm going, please don't follow me.

Thank you for the fun days we had together. I don't think I'll ever forget them.

Yours,

Fuuka Hamilton

Miyako bit down on her lip.

"This is... too cruel, Fuuka-chan."

I decided to make you happy. You're such a hard worker, you devoted yourself to your father and your fiancé, and I decided to make you happy.

But there's no point feeling sorry for myself for not noticing her hesitation.

"I'm so gonna catch up to you!"

After all, we still haven't followed through on our plan to have a picnic. I still haven't heard you say "I'm happy."

Day 10, Evening: The Traveling Merchant and Her Family

Meanwhile, Fuuka was inside a rocking carriage headed for the capital. Her glossy black hair swayed in the wind. She gazed at the scenery as it flittered by. Sitting next to her was Odina Florence, Miyako's older brother and a spy in the service of their shared, indecisive ex-fiancé Klaus Reinhardt.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Fuuka-sama? Umm..."

"Do what? Abandon your little sister? Or turn tail back to the capital?" asked Fuuka, keeping her gaze pointed outside the window.

"Both."

"I do feel a little guilty for doing this to Miyako. But... the Florence family are regional nobles. If it came to light that Miyako abducted *me*, the eldest daughter of the Hamilton family of the royal court of the capital, it would spell the end for your family, don't you think?"

"Ah, well, you have a point," said Odina. He then added bitterly, "Although I'm not so sure my master has thought that far ahead."

"Klaus-sama asked you to bring Miyako back. But if she goes back there, she'll be stuck there with him this time... I'm certain that's the last thing she wants."

She's like the sun, warm and bright. She's as free-spirited as a bird; she wouldn't be able to bear living the life of a noble's bride in the royal court.

"So I'll apologize on her behalf, and tell them she's not coming back."

"Wait! If you do that you'll—"

Odina grew flustered. To go up against a family on the level of the Reinhardts was essentially suicide. She probably wouldn't be able to remain in the capital as a noble anymore.

"I'm only 'damaged goods' to the Hamilton family now, anyway. If they want to strip me of my title or banish me, then let them," said Fuuka, as though she had given up on everything.

With that determination in her heart, Fuuka had slipped away from the cabin, gotten help from Shan Li's stand-in, and made her way to the Florence family home. There, she persuaded Odina—and now was headed to the capital.

It's all right. I'm all right. I can cope with living in the capital again, now that I've had these fun days, even if it was only ten of them.

The carriage drove on.

“...Excuse me, Shan Li-san, Fuuka-chan hasn’t come here by any chance, has she?”

Miyako knocked on the door to the house with an icy look on her face, and Shan Li invited her in without saying anything. A young girl poked her head out from a room in the back. She had chestnut hair, and was the spitting image of the *clearly-fifteen-years-old-but-not-actually* traveling merchant from the Continent. It was the girl who, until recently, had been bedridden. Back in good health, she speedily poured tea for Miyako.

“Umm, thank you so much for saving me, Miyako-sama... I don’t know how I should thank Fuuka-sama either...”

“Oh, please, there’s no need for the ‘sama.’”

“Don’t be silly, you and Fuuka-chan are our saints! You saved Aisha’s life, so enough of that!”

Hearing her name called, Aisha blushed and nodded, sending her shiny chestnut hair bouncing, and her cute eyes darted up and down.

It seemed unbelievable that this was the same girl who’d looked like a waxwork dummy when she was suffering from miasmal autointoxication. Miyako was frustrated that Fuuka couldn’t see just how far the girl had recovered.

Fuuka-chan, how could you just up and go like this? If she’s not here, then she really has gone back to the capital. But why...

“...Why didn’t you say anything, Umi?”

“I had nyo obligation to stop her. After all, it’s something she decided for herself, nyo?” replied Umi, letting out a large yawn from Miyako’s lap, where she was curled up.

Miyako knew that the fluffy water spirit had done nothing to stop Fuuka from leaving the cabin, but she couldn’t blame her for that. After all, that wasn’t Umi’s responsibility. *And Fuuka-chan’s kind. She must have imagined all sorts of things after Odina showed up. Then she took it on her own shoulders and left my side to put an end to it all by herself.*

She believes the only thing making me happy is escaping the Reinhardt family. That’s the sort of person Fuuka is, the villainess fated to die a pathetic death in the backdrop of the game’s true ending.

“...Master,” purred Umi from Miyako’s lap, “you’re trying to change fate. I can tell.”

Even though they were right there, Shan Li and Aisha didn’t turn to face Umi. It seemed Umi was speaking in a way that only the person she held a contract with, Miyako, could hear.

“But changing fate is nyot so simple. Nyo matter who you are or

where you come from, master.”

Umi seemed to know Miyako’s origins. *Now that I think about it, I haven’t been all that conscious lately of the fact that I came from another world*, thought Miyako. Ever since her engagement fell apart—since she ran to get Fuuka—she’d lost that feeling that stuck with her when she followed the game’s scenarios exactly.

“As a mighty water spirit, I don’t lend a helping hand to humans as a rule... But if my master decided to use her voice to order me to run a thousand miles, I would lend her my back to ride and take her to the capital at once. Just like the other night.”

Umi yawned deeply and stopped speaking.

Miyako cradled the mug filled with tea Aisha had poured for her and thought to herself. *Fuuka-chan told me in her letter that two women living together only happens in dreams, and we can’t make it real. I don’t have anything of worth, so is it really all right for me to chase after her again?* She lost herself in thought.

Shan Li was writing something in a corner of the room, possibly an order for merchandise. Aisha sat quietly on a chair, staring outside the window. Miyako felt thankful that they were giving her room to think, not stirring up excessive conversation. *They’re being so considerate, even though I just barged in here.*

Just then, she heard the door open.

“Ah!” said Shan Li’s daughter Aisha, standing up and running to the entrance. “Mama’s home!”

“Huh? Your Mama?”

Aisha’s mother Shan Li was still working on her document in the corner. It looked like she had finished writing, as she was drying the ink on the pen with a cloth. *So why did she say “Mama” is home?* Two pairs of footsteps drew closer—one pair heavy, one pair light.

The door to the living room opened, and in came...

“...Oh, are you Miyako Florence? I heard you helped my Shan Li, and my darling daughter.”

“T-That’s me.”

“Thank you so much... I mean it.”

The woman who showed up had glowing blonde hair and was tall enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with the soldiers of the capital. Her voice was low and sweet. She was a beauty dressed in dignified traveler’s garb. She looked so mature, so pretty, so cool.

“Mama, welcome home!!” Aisha beamed, clinging to the woman’s legs.

But what does she mean, “Mama”?

“Ah, Shan Li, you haven’t told her?” The tall beauty smiled gently. “My name’s Maria. I’m Shan Li’s wife.”

“Huh?”

“Geez, Maria!!!” Shan Li didn’t stop dealing with her pen, but her cheeks reddened. “A-*Ahem!* What she said. That’s how it is,” Shan Li blurted, then began muttering to herself in Continental.

Even Miyako could see she was a little embarrassed.

Looking at Maria’s body and its very prominent curves, she was beyond all doubt a woman. *So basically... that means...*

“Shan Li-san is Maria-san’s wife.”

“Yeah.”

“And *Maria-san* is *Shan Li-san*’s wife?”

The one who answered Miyako was Aisha.

“Yep! Shan Li’s my Mom, and Maria is my Mama!”

Miyako’s jaw dropped, and Maria said to her mischievously, “Hahaha, surprised?”

“Er, no, I...”

Miyako clammed up.

Two mothers. I never knew that sort of family structure existed in this country. Yet, she couldn’t deny the family in front of her did, in fact, exist.

Miyako was surprised, but a warm light flowed into the back of her chilled heart.

“So... do you want to hear about how we met?”

Drawn in by Maria’s gentle tone of voice, Miyako nodded.

Day 10, Late Night: A Certain Family's Past and Present

"Hmm, where should I begin?" said Maria nonchalantly.

I need to catch up to Fuuka-chan quickly, but is that really the right thing to do? Thoughts like that swirled around Miyako's mind. She couldn't bring herself to stand and leave, so she listened to Maria.

"I thought she was an angel. Or, in the words of the Continent, a Xian Nu. That's how she seemed to me," said Maria, Shan Li's partner and "Mama" to her daughter Aisha. Maria took in the smell of her raspberry tea.

Ten years before that time, civil war raged in the Neese Continent.

There was a mercenary by the name of Maria. That mercenary, hailed as "Calamity Witch," "Murder's Finest," and "Wandering Massacre," took a hit in one battle and was on the retreat.

Shit... Our leader's useless!

A man who cared only about his own career had taken command of her band of mercenaries. As he belonged to the regular army, his command was a sight to behold and stole the lives of untold numbers of mercenaries. They were not victims of battle but victims of his command.

The battle wiped out Maria's platoon. *There won't be any other survivors*, thought Maria. Her own wounds were grave. *How disappointing. How truly disappointing.*

She lost her family to war when she was a child. Remnants of the resistance took her in, and they gave her a choice: the battlefield or the brothel. They told her women were fortunate; they had a choice.

So Maria lived as a soldier. Fortune kept her alive when the resistance collapsed, and then she became a mercenary. Fortune saw her through countless battles.

There was always someone who would start calling her the "Angel of Slaughter" and other such names, but that would all end on this day.

"I've really never had anything I could call a family."

Covered in blood, she dragged herself along, before collapsing in the shadow of a rock. She muttered to herself in a tone of voice that

was strangely carefree given the situation she was in.

Just then.

“Please stop!”

A shrill voice rang out.

She urged her cold, languid body further to see what was going on, and found a girl. She was unarmed and surrounded by bandits. She clutched an infant in her arms.

“Don’t kill us!” screamed the girl, shielding the baby in her arms.

Watching that, Maria realized something. *I’ve never once fought to protect someone else. I’ve always fought just to fight.*

And so, she thought to herself, *If I’m going to die anyway, then this once. Just this once.*

“...Get lost, scumbags.”

Before she knew it, her short sword was in her hand. She decided to protect this girl, a stranger whose name she didn’t even know.

“Have you come to?”

When she next opened her eyes, she found herself wrapped inside a blanket. Her wound caused her severe pain, but she was still alive.

Just my luck. I survived again.

“...Did you look after me?”

The girl nodded. The infant she carried in a sling on her back snoozed gently. It seemed they were no longer in any danger.

“Okay, I’ve just got to go somewhere,” whispered the girl. After a moment’s silence, she said in a tone that seemed to feel Maria out, “If you don’t mind... could you look after my child for a little?”

“What?”

“Her,” said the girl, pointing to the baby on her back. “It’d make it easier for me to move about.”

It was the first time Maria had held a baby, but she accepted with pleasure. The baby was warm and soft, and so fragile. She had a sweet smell.

“I’m telling you, Maria was my hero!” said Shan Li, as she mixed raspberry jam into her raspberry tea.

“Oh, *Mooooom!*” Aisha laughed at her Mom’s embarrassed giggles.

“I’m from a clan called the ‘Mountain Sage’s Kin.’ That’s why I still look so young at thirty.”

“Right, er, you don’t just look *young*, you don’t look any older than fifteen.”

“For that reason, back in the Continent, people are always after

the children from my clan.”

According to Shan Li, the noble classes would keep members of the Mountain Sage’s Kin at their side as a status symbol. When she met Maria, she was running for her life with her newborn baby girl from the mansion of a noble who had abducted her to keep as a concubine.

“I really thought I was a goner.”

The neighboring country was in the midst of a violent civil war, and the upper classes cared only for themselves. As the childlike Shan Li tried to escape with her baby, it was clear what fate awaited her: death.

But just as she thought that, a large-statured woman showed up. Though drenched in blood herself, she defeated the bandits one by one. After she dispatched the men surrounding Shan Li, she collapsed onto the ground.

“So I thought, ‘Oh no, I’ve gotta help her,’” giggled Shan Li. “Then I found this cave. I borrowed some medicine and food from a nearby village and sold the valuables I had on me to buy other things and start making money.”

“T-That’s when you became a merchant?!”

“Yep. Trading’s fun. It’s a way of life.”

Shan Li puffed her chest out in pride.

“That’s how it is, anyway. Fate... or maybe love at first sight? That sort of thing,” said Maria with a little laugh.

Looking closely, Miyako noticed that old scars criss-crossed Maria’s arms and cheeks. Miyako couldn’t reconcile Shan Li’s chuckling and Maria’s kind smile with the story she’d just heard.

Everybody has their own circumstances, and every family has its past. Obvious as that may be, it was novel to Miyako.

“Umm, can I ask one thing?”

“Anything,” answered Maria.

“Shan Li-san, why did you decide to save Maria-san back then?”

It was a frank question.

Maria saved her when she was in need, so she had a debt. But few would be in any hurry to aid a soldier dressed in the blood-stained uniform of a defeated army. Shan Li might have helped her only for Maria to act like she’d stuck her nose where it didn’t belong. At worst, Shan Li could have wound up dead. Even if it didn’t get that bad, staying put there was still nothing but risk for Shan Li.

“Hmm, that’s simple,” said the thirty year-old-woman with the looks of a young girl, “Because I wanted to.”

“That’s...!”

“And I’m *sooo* happy now because of it,” said Shan Li, before lowering her voice and continuing. “Are you any different, Miyako?”

“I...”

Fuuka's face popped into her mind. She saw the tragic character from behind her screen, the villainess of an otome game. She was harder-working than anyone, a kind-hearted person who prioritized others over herself.

“I...”

She knows everything. She sucks at cooking. She loves helping other people. She's stubborn and hates being alone and puts in so much effort and is kind and cute—my dearest Fuuka-chan.

Miyako wondered, *Why did I decide to take her away with me? Because I felt sorry for her? Because I wanted to save her? Was I doing it for her? No, that's not why.*

I... I wanted it to be me who saved her. That's why I chased after her. That's all I was thinking.

“...Excuse me, Shan Li-san, Maria-san, Aisha-chan.”

“Sure.”

“I've gotta go!”

That brought smiles to Shan Li and Maria. It was the smile of a couple who had found a peaceful way to live after persevering together through countless troubles and hardships.

“That's the spirit,” said Maria.

Miyako thought, *From the beginning, it's always been about me.*

If that's the case, I'll go take her hand however many times I have to. I'll chase her to the ends of the world. Because I regret my last life where I tried to grin and bear it with everything until I collapsed from overwork, I've decided to live more selfishly this time.

“Umi!”

“Nyaa.”

She looked out the window. Night had closed in. A full moon hung in the night sky. Aisha had been snoring gently for a little while. Fuuka had left about twelve hours before.

If Fuuka had taken a single-horse carriage, that would be one thing. But if she took a three-horse carriage or something faster, she would be almost at the capital by now.

I need to hurry after her.

No carriage would leave this late at night. But Miyako had Umi.

“What is it? Have you finally accepted what you need to do and come around to relying on my power?”

Reining in her desire to stroke Umi as she wagged her bushy tail, Miyako ordered the mighty Undine.

“Yeah. Please, Umi. I order you as your master: take me to Ode!”

At once, light imbued with the power of pure water flooded into the room, and the Undine took on its true, divine form.

Day 11, Morning: The Villainess's Pride and the Heroine's Determination

"I have nothing to say to you," said Count Dan Hamilton, the current head of the Hamilton family.

His almost comical mustache could come across as charming from a certain angle, but his attitude was anything but. The look in his eyes revealed that he thought of everyone but himself as nothing more than rats. He directed these ice-cold words at Fuuka Hamilton. The morning light filled the mansion, but the air inside felt frigid.

"Yes. My humble apologies, Father."

Fuuka repeated those words over and over.

His daughter had run away from home after failing in the struggle to find a partner for a political marriage. The gossip that followed was unbecoming of the venerable Hamilton family. The rumor-hungry nobles of the capital would have delighted themselves with talk of Fuuka's flight.

"Get out. You can sleep in the garden shed from now on."

"Understood."

"And don't talk to your sisters."

"Understood."

"You've disgraced our family name, so don't think you have any home here... God help me, *this* is what I get for showing mercy to my bastard daughter," said Dan, as though spitting the words out.

Yes, Fuuka was the child of Dan and his mistress. Having no heir at that point, Dan took Fuuka in and raised her. But soon afterwards, his legal wife bore him several other daughters, and Fuuka lost any value beyond being a tool for political marriage in Dan's eyes.

Fuuka had been content with that, because she believed that if she could just work hard enough, be the best child—more capable than anyone else—then someday her father, mother, and sisters would take notice of her.

"Begone. I'm busy handling preparations for our joint project with the Reinhardts. They didn't pull out after you fucked up your engagement with Klaus-sama. Be grateful."

"...Understood."

After exiting the room in silence, Fuuka clenched her fists.

You're amazing, Fuuka-chan.

You know everything, Fuuka-chan; you work so hard.

...I love you, Fuuka-chan!

Although they only spent ten days together, her rival's voice, Miyako's voice, echoed through her head over and over.

Why, oh why, did I take her outstretched hand back then? Why did I let myself be taken in by her reddish-brown hair? Why did I spend those happy days with her? I'm supposed to be stronger than this. And I was... until I spent time with someone who accepted me, praised me, told me she loved me... with Miyako.

"...Miyako."

I miss her. Fuuka missed the auburn-haired girl so much, but she was the one who cast her off. She threw it all away herself. Fuuka's pride wouldn't allow her to sink into regret about how she missed Miyako at this late hour.

I'm acting selfish, thought Fuuka, admonishing herself as she made for her room—the shed.

The maids watching made no effort to pretend they weren't gossiping about her. Fuuka's gaze landed on one of the maids in particular.

Hmm...? What's that?

A red rash lined her neck. Her complexion was pale, and it looked like she had broken out into a cold sweat. Fuuka had a feeling she had seen that rash somewhere recently.

I don't like this.

"You there... Do you feel ill at all?" she called out without thinking.

But...

"I-I shouldn't... I have to go get the washing done!"

"Oh, they asked me to clean the young lady's room," said one of the others.

They dispersed the moment Fuuka called out to them. It was as though she had disturbed a spider's nest.

My word, what rudeness... But I have to expect that, now that I'm the Hamilton family's unwanted goods. Fuuka sighed deeply. *I'm worried about that maid's condition, but I mustn't do anything to stand out right now.*

Fuuka walked on in silence. She could hear the maids—or perhaps her sisters—mocking her in the distance.

But, at any rate, I mustn't cause any trouble. That's what I promised Odina-san.

Meanwhile, at the Reinhardt mansion.

"So you're saying you couldn't find Miyako Florence?!"

"Yes. My deepest apologies, Klaus-sama!!"

Odina lowered his head in a beautiful bow. After years of service, he was incredibly skilled at bowing his head. "If apologizing gets the job done, I'll apologize for everything" was Odina Florence's personal philosophy.

"But I did go without sleep searching every inch of the Atika region!"

That was a lie. Odina had lazed around at his family's Atikan home.

"My parents haven't heard from Miyako either!"

This too was a lie. Their parents still believed that Miyako was in the middle of preparing for a splendid wedding in the capital, and he didn't want to spoil that.

"All I managed to do was find Fuuka Hamilton, who says she fled the capital after encouraging Miyako to do the same..."

Of course, this was another lie... Or rather, this was the main part of the promise between Fuuka and Odina. If it came out that Miyako had taken away the count's daughter Fuuka of her own accord and was currently on the run, then the Florence family's standing would be endangered.

Fuuka had lost her mind, and everything was her doing. That was the explanation Fuuka wanted Odina to give.

Although this seems pretty risky too...

Depending on how the situation developed, Fuuka and the rest of the Hamilton family might not emerge unscathed. In normal circumstances, if this report reached Fuuka's father, the Hamilton family's head, the best outcome would be Fuuka's disinheritance and banishment. As a worst-case scenario, it was entirely possible that he would have Fuuka assassinated.

But Fuuka didn't budge. She mustn't have been able to stomach Miyako, the one who taught her what it meant to be happy, suffering even the slightest misfortune.

I have to say, my little sister is quite the player.

Odina heaved a sigh.

"What are you sighing for?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I got carried away with my thoughts."

"Hmph."

Klaus cupped his chin and pondered. He stayed like that for a little while, then he hit upon something and raised his voice.

"That's it!"

Deeply unsettled by his master's triumphant expression, but well-accustomed to his job, Klaus's personal spy spoke.

"What is it, Klaus-sama? Have you come up with another hair-brained... *Ahem!* I mean, have you come up with something?"

"I have... I surprise even myself sometimes."

Klaus smoothed his blond hair back with a smile.

“To think... Fuuka was head over heels for me as well! Unable to marry me, she got desperate and snatched Miyako away!!”

His voice oozed certainty.

Odina struggled to keep his inner thought of “there’s no hope for this one” from showing on his face. *Just let me quit now.*

Odina couldn’t stand that, in spite of all his master’s pretension, he had a good-looking face and struck a nice pose.

“That is a very... novel interpretation, my lord.”

“Hmm... We must do something. Spy!”

“What?”

Thoroughly fed up, Odina gave a half-hearted reply.

“Bring me Fuuka Hamilton!”

“Sure, sure... Er, huh?”

“Bring me Fuuka Hamilton, I said.”

“Yeah, I heard you, but why would you—”

In his and Fuuka’s plans, they had expected Klaus to try to continue the search for Miyako, whereupon Odina would feed him false information. Of course, he would never manage to find Miyako. They figured that if that dragged on, even Klaus would give up. “Bring me Fuuka” was an unexpected reaction.

“I hear Count Hamilton is quite the stern character. Fuuka must be feeling rather dejected right now. And I am a kind soul...”

Odina cracked a smile. It seemed like Klaus had a rekindled interest in Fuuka, the woman he rejected as a fiancée.

“I’ll comfort Fuuka myself. While I’m at it, I suppose I might as well find out where Miyako is from her too.”

“S-Sure...”

“I *am* quite the ladies’ man. A sheltered girl like Fuuka doesn’t stand a chance against my techniques.”

Faced with such a confident display, Odina thought, *Whoa, get a load of yourself. I’m not a woman, but even I’m cringing at you.*

But being a humble servant, Odina solemnly obeyed the order and departed for the Hamilton mansion.

At the entrance to the capital, there was a large gate. Miyako stood *atop* that gate.

“Thanks, Umi.”

“It was nothing.”

Umi had transformed into the form of a cool-water spirit, a huge semi-transparent beast somewhere between a cat and a tiger. Miyako stood next to her. Beneath them sprawled the streets and houses of the capital.

It had only been ten days since she had left here with Fuuka, but it felt longer to Miyako.

"I didn't see any carriages that could have had her onboard on our way here... so Fuuka-chan should be here already."

She took a deep breath.

I can't just waltz in and snatch her up like I did before. Wherever she is, I'll do my utmost and go to get her fair and square.

And I don't mind if she turns me down. After all, this is just me being selfish.

I'm doing all this for Fuuka-chan's sake, after she was treated so horribly by the Hamilton family—That's a fine pretext. But really, I'm doing it for my own selfish reasons. I want to be happy with Fuuka-chan. So Fuuka-chan has the right to refuse, although I'd be sad if she did.

But, that's exactly why I want to see this through. I want to tell Fuuka-chan one more time just how much I love her. Even if nothing comes of it, I don't want to lie to myself. There was a time I kept telling myself lies, got addicted to my job, and died from overwork. I never, ever want to go through that again.

"Okay... let's go, Umi."

"...Nyaa."

The great water spirit meowed like an ordinary cat, as though giving her blessing to her temporary master's small but precious determination.

"...Uh, ummm," started Miyako after she looked down at the capital, "Umi-san!! First things first, I really would like to get down from here, if that's okay?!"

The capital's gate was far too high for Miyako to get down by herself.

The wind blew on.

Day 11, Noon: Second Home and the Head Maid

Compared to those of other regional nobles, the Florence family's second home in the capital was especially modest. Located on the outskirts of an affluent neighborhood in the east of the capital, most of its grounds were set aside for gardening, and the Florences had planted those of the Atikan plants that could grow in the capital.

It took on a bright atmosphere after Miyako arrived looking for a fiancé, but when the overworked Odina lived there by himself, the locals had called it a gloomy haunted mansion.

"Lady Miyako! I'm glad you've returned safely," said the head maid Susie, giving Miyako a warm welcome. She had served as the head maid at the Florence family's second home for as long as Miyako could remember, and the wrinkles engraved in her forehead displayed a sort of dignity, as though they embodied her warm but strict personality.

Susie heaved a heavy sigh.

"I never would have guessed that Fuuka Hamilton would lose her mind and abduct you after losing her engagement..."

"Huh, what?! That's what people are saying?!"

It's the other way around! If it's one or the other, well, no, it's completely the other way around! I took Fuuka's hand and dragged her along to the Atika region. So where's this coming from?

"All the rumors have it that none other than Fuuka Hamilton herself confessed as such. So much so that even *I* know about it, and I'm just an old servant."

"But that's..."

Why would she do that? The question circled around Miyako's mind.

"I hear that she confessed as much to Reinhardt-sama. I'm not sure what deal they made, but the rumors say that to apologize the Hamilton family has taken on the brunt of the costs for the Enot River management project they're working on jointly with the Reinhardt family."

"But..."

"But I'm glad. When you and Fuuka went missing at the same time, if there had been even the slightest suspicion that you abducted a lady of the Hamilton family... I'm afraid that would have spelled the

end for a family of regional nobles like the Florences,” said Susie in a matter-of-fact way.

That made Miyako realize what had happened.

I get it now... Fuuka lied to protect me.

“Thanks, Susie.”

“You’re welcome. By the way... who’s the cat?”

“Nyaa?”

“Ah, she’s called Umi, and...”

And she’s an Undine that was sleeping beneath the garden of our cabin in the countryside, Miyako almost continued, but she stopped herself.

“We’ve never kept a cat here before...”

Susie was clearly hesitant, so Miyako hurried to smooth things over.

“She’s a good cat, no trouble at all!”

“Nyaa!”

Umi nodded in satisfaction at Miyako’s praise. For the moment, she seemed to be following Miyako’s request to act like a normal cat.

“Hmm.”

Susie directed her sharp gaze at Umi.

“And she’s well-mannered!”

“Nyaa!”

“I see?”

“And she’s so cute...”

“Nyaa...”

“Is that so?”

“And she’s really dignified!”

“Nyo kidding!”

“Hmm... Huh?!”

...Oops.

“N-Nyo kidding!!”

Trying to cover up Umi’s voice after she forgot herself and jumped into the conversation, Miyako desperately did her best cat impression. It paid off, and they just barely managed to get Susie to allow Umi into the house.

“Well then, my lady,” Susie cleared her throat and began again in a more formal tone. “Judging from how you’ve hurried back, I imagine you have something you’d like me to do for you?”

Susie stood up straight, and Miyako nodded her head.

I’m taking Fuuka-chan back. I came back to the capital to do that, to fight for that. The head maid is a capable, dignified woman. I can count on her support.

“Susie, I want you to gather the things I’m about to tell you as quickly as you can.”

Hearing Miyako’s voice, Umi flicked her tail from within her arms.

Writing paper, an envelope, servants' clothing, a gorgeous dress, and one of the small flowers blooming in the corner of the garden. Those are what Miyako asked the head maid Susie to get for her urgently.

"Miyako, what's that?"

Umi stood on her hind legs and stared at Miyako's hands as she sat at the desk writing.

"It's a letter to Odina."

"Can you trust him?"

"Hmm, my brother generally doesn't have much going on in his head. He does whatever he's told... a typical worker drone. He doesn't really have any convictions, so to speak, so I think we can get him to do what we want."

Miyako knew that Odina worked for the Reinhardt family. She wasn't aware that he worked as a spy, a sort of shadow steward, but her appraisal of Odina wasn't far off. He had no firm convictions, and he was soft on those close to him. The only reason he brought Fuuka to the capital was because she had asked him to.

He was working for the Reinhardts to save up money for the future when he would assume the role of head of the Florence family. Still, he was much more suited to the life of a worker than he was to being a country noble who would have to deal with all sorts of trouble. *It's a shame his current job has such dull prospects.*

All that ran through Miyako's mind as she touched pen to paper.

"Okay, that's done with. Now all I need to do is..."

She sealed the envelope with wax and wrote "Odina Florence" on it in large letters. Then she stood up suddenly and took off her clothes.

"My, how bold, master!"

"I'm just getting changed."

Miyako put on a style of work clothes that was all the rage amongst the working class of the capital. They were modest clothes, designed with a russet theme and very little lace or decorative buttons. They were much simpler than the plain clothes Miyako wore while living in the Atikan countryside.

First, I have to check whether Fuuka-chan is okay.

The people of the Hamilton household were exceptionally cold towards failures. They might be treating Fuuka poorly. *Actually, there's no "might" about it.*

I'll assess the situation first... Then, I'll be straight with her when I take her away from that place; no more catching her off guard.

"Huh."

"What's the matter, master?"

“Nothing, I just thought, I’ve really changed.”

Miyako thought about her previous life, which she’d whittled away with long hours of work. She could never say no and was always passive, giving up on what she wanted. She used to hope in vain that some other person would change things for her. That hope had a name, “salvation by faith.”

But then she met Fuuka, fell in love, and came up with a plan employing all her knowledge and strength to run away with her. And now, she was using her own initiative to take on the world and secure a future she could share with Fuuka. She decided to keep up the fight as long as it would take.

I’ve changed. I feel like I could do anything for Fuuka-chan.

Far from the game’s plotted course, Miyako could no longer tell the future.

But she had an Undine by her side. And she had Shan Li, Aisha, and Maria spurring her on. She also had her feelings for Fuuka.

Miyako was so happy to have all of them. She felt invincible, like she could do anything.

“All right!”

She tied her long, auburn hair up in a plain bun and gave a cheer to pump herself up.

“First, we’ve got to see how Fuuka-chan’s doing!”

“Nyaa.”

Miyako clenched her fist firmly and took the first step of her plan to retrieve Fuuka.

Umi yawned by her feet.

From behind the door, a figure watched them. It was Susie, the head maid who managed the only three servants in the Florence family’s second home.

Day 11, Night: Reunion and Pinky Promise

The first step of the plan to rescue Fuuka Hamilton was to ascertain her whereabouts.

Now that she's back in the capital, I can't imagine they're treating her very well. After all, these are the people who treat her like she's nothing more than a handy tool for political marriage.

Miyako left Umi behind. While it would be one thing for a member of the Florence family, no servant of the Hamilton family would bring a cat to their workplace.

She walked down the corridor. Fuuka's room ought to have been just around the corner.

Hang in there, Fuuka-chan. Suppressing her urge to hurry, Miyako carried on down the Hamilton family's corridor. *I need to save her quickly.*

Okay, I'm in!

Miyako snuck into the Hamilton mansion unseen. It was easier than she'd expected. Tensing up from nerves, she observed the mansion grounds.

The servant outfit Susie had prepared for her blended in well with the servants working in the Hamilton mansion. Several of them wore uniforms—*actually, matching maid outfits. They're cute.*

Fuuka-chan would look amazing in them. I wonder if I could borrow one. This time, I'll get Fuuka-chan to promise to stay with me forever. We'll run somewhere far away, and I'll get her to wear one of these super-cute maid outfits. She'd look great, I know it. She'd look so cute.



Ah, I hope I see her soon, thought Miyako. While her thoughts ran wild, she kept up the pretense of a servant.

"I'll be taking the linens!"

"Oh, are you new?" called out a female servant. She seemed experienced.

"Y-Yes," said Miyako, forcing her face into a smile.

"Hmmm."

The servant cocked her head.

Oh no. She knows something's up. A bead of cold sweat ran down her forehead. She held the newly washed linen in front of her and stood up straight, trying to look as dignified as she could.

"I'm taking these to Fuuka-sama's room!"

"...What?"

The servant eyed her with suspicion.

Whoops, thought Miyako, *did I just screw up?*

"Come over here."

"Whoa!"

The servant dragged her along by the sleeve and pulled her into a recess. An intimidating expression crept onto her face as she spoke.

"Don't say Fuuka-sama's name so loudly!"

"Huh, that means..."

"Hurry up and take them to the shed. Take this, too."

She handed Miyako a hard candy.

"...Okay."

Miyako thought about the shed, the candy shoved into her hand, and the fact that Fuuka's name was taboo. She considered what it all meant. She looked out the window. Dusk enveloped the landscape.

They've locked Fuuka-chan in the shed...?

Miyako felt her chest tightening. Before she could find her words, the veteran servant dropped her voice to a whisper.

"And by the way."

"Wh-What is it?"

"That flower in your hair is a bit too gaudy for a servant. Be more careful."

"O-Okay. Sorry."

The flower in her hair was the one she'd had Susie prepare, a single flower that grew in the garden of the Florence family's second home in the capital. Miyako had brought the flower to give to Fuuka.

It's cold. Fuuka hugged herself in the shed, where the temperature had plummeted in the night. *So very cold.* She found herself recalling Miyako's warmth on that rainy afternoon, in the bed of the small

Atikan cabin, far from this place. *But I chose this path for myself.*

She brushed her fingers along the piece of paper in her hand. It was a contract, which she couldn't even read in this unlit shed.

"This is how you can contribute to the Hamilton family."

That was what her father said as he handed her the contract. She had no choice but to sign. All her family ever gave her were conditions: "as long as you excel," "as long as you're beautiful," "as long as you win the bridal wars." Their treatment of her as a noble lady was always conditional.

All I wanted was a caring family, without all those contracts, thought Fuuka. So why did I tell Miyako she had to make me say I'm happy within two weeks? What made me come out with that contract myself? Did I find her frightening for accepting me for who I am? Why did I waltz back to the capital, telling myself it was for her sake? Couldn't I have believed the pipe dream that the two of us could run far away... and live together, as two women?

"...Hmph, what am I saying? That's impossible."

Regret won't get me anywhere, now. I'll obey my family's orders. After all, I'll never see Miyako again.

Just then, a light shone from outside the shed's small window.

"—chan... Fuuka-chan!"

She heard a voice as bright as the sun. *Am I hearing things? No, this can't be.*

"Fuuka-chan!"

"Miyako?!"

Fuuka scrambled up to the window, gathering the furniture strewn across the shed like junk to use as a footstool. The door was locked from the outside. She looked out the window, and there—

"Are you okay, Fuuka-chan?!"

—stood Miyako, with a broad smile on her face. She stood there like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"So they *have* got you locked up in here... Sorry, I looked for the key but couldn't find it. I hope I can at least get these sheets over to you."

"Why... Why are you here?"

Fuuka struggled to get the words out. The sight before her seemed like a convenient illusion.

"Well, the two weeks aren't up yet."

"What?"

Miyako smiled to reassure Fuuka.

"I'm gonna make you say you're happy within two weeks. There's two days left, so please, give me a little longer."

"Th-*That's* why you're here? Didn't you read my letter? It's over; it's *okay*, Miyako."

“It might be impossible, and it might be selfish, but give me a chance.”

Miyako picked the flower from her hair, a white lily. She stood on her tiptoes and presented it to Fuuka.

“Heh heh. And this time, Fuuka-chan, I won’t try to catch you off guard or abduct you. I’ve come to tell you I love you in front of everyone, fair and square.”

“You... what?”

“Next time I’ll bring a whole bouquet-full, so many you can’t even carry them.”

Fuuka gently took the flower from her.

“I’ll never stop telling you: Fuuka-chan, let’s be happy together!”

Miyako’s honesty brought to Fuuka’s lips words which she had never been able to say to anybody. *But if it’s Miyako—*

“Miyako... please.”

—I should be able to throw away my stubbornness, pride, and doubts, and just say it.

“Please, save me!”

The contract they gave Fuuka made her swear to “dedicate herself to the river management project.” The Hamilton family staked their honor on that project, the joint enterprise they were planning with the Reinhardts, with whom they no longer had marital relations.

Accident after accident had delayed work on the river management project, prompting somebody to suggest that they send in a person with training in white magic as a shaman. That person would offer prayers by the river bank. They planned to hold the ceremony on a stormy day, when the meandering river burst its banks most often.

Count Dan Hamilton had decided on Fuuka, who possessed a remarkable command of white magic for a noble lady.

“They’re making you a living sacrifice?!”

“Not so loudly, Miyako.”

“But in this day and age...! I don’t get it.”

“What the Hamilton family wants is a link to the higher-status Reinhardts. I might not be trueborn, but I am a lady of the Hamilton family, and making me offer prayers for the river management project at the risk of my life will be a good opportunity to prove our loyalty to the Reinhardts. Furthermore...”

Fuuka let her words hang. She nestled her nose in the freshly washed linens she had just about managed to pull through the window. Feeling slightly guilty, she didn’t dare eat the candy that one of the servants had sent her. There was nobody in this house she

trusted.

“What would happen if I were to die tragically in the middle of the prayers?”

“...It would leave a stronger impression?”

“Exactly. They say Klaus-sama is fixated on you, Miyako. But if that were to happen, he wouldn’t be able to ignore the Hamiltons. Although there is a slight age gap, a marriage between him and one of my sisters might be on the table,” stated Fuuka in a detached tone.

I can’t see Klaus thinking that far ahead... The man’s got a nice face but nothing behind it, thought Miyako. She had her doubts, but she was not prepared to let something so unjust happen, especially not to Fuuka.

“I’ll save you,” swore Miyako, deliberately.

“They’ll hold the prayer ceremony the next time it rains. Going by the smell in the air, that could be as early as tomorrow night.”

Fuuka stretched her arm outside the window in desperation. Miyako reached upwards in response.

“Please, Miyako. Please save me before then!”

Her little finger intertwined with Miyako’s.

“I will, no matter what. Leave it to me. I’ll turn their world upside down!”

They sealed their promise.

This wasn’t a contract or a deal or anything like that; it was a bond of compassion that joined the two of them.

Day 11, Night: An Overworked Brother and a Letter

Miyako promised to stop at nothing to save Fuuka, and then she left. Just then, a figure emerged from behind a tree.

“Miyako.”

“O-Odina?!”

That figure was Odina Florence, Miyako’s older brother and the eldest son of the Florence family. He was at that time working for the Reinhardts for networking purposes.

“Why are you here?”

“Susie told me. The *one* time I managed to get some sleep in the house, too.”

“Wait, you were there?!”

“Yeah. I was out for the count. I’ve got to make the most of my days off, after all. And I wasn’t feeling great, so...”

Miyako thought she had been the only one in the Florences’ second home in the capital. *But you were just sleeping?!*

“So, *why* are you here?”

“Simple,” said Odina with a sigh. “I’m here to stop you.”

“...That’s not gonna happen.” Miyako stepped back, glaring at Odina. *If you’re going to stand in my way, I don’t care if I have to thump you to get past.* “You’re on the Reinhardts’ side, right? Well, I’m on Fuuka-chan’s side.”

“No... Well, I *do* work for them, but... If you do this, it’ll be a real pain, so quit it. I mean, it’s not like it’s guaranteed she’ll die when she prays at the river anyway...”

“I can’t let them treat Fuuka-chan like she’s some tool.”

“Yeah, but...”

“So don’t try to stop me.”

“Listen to me!!!” shouted Odina.

He furrowed his brow, looking older than his years. His usual cheerfulness was gone.

“...I’m telling you not to go stirring up trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“That’s right. God only knows why, but Klaus-sama is head over heels for you. The way I see it, you should ask him to uncanceled your engagement. He might actually do that... I work for the man, so I can tell. He’s just another simpleton. To be honest, he doesn’t have much

going on in his head.”

“I know that.”

“And he doesn’t have any sense as an employer!”

“I know that too.”

“And he exploits his employees!!”

“Odina.”

“Right, yeah. The point is, as ordinary as he is, he’ll do all right when he takes over the powerful Reinhardt family.”

“So?”

“So... families are organizations. However much you love somebody, I think it’s stupid to go up against a powerful organization for a single person,” said Odina with a self-deprecating chuckle, as though he knew better than anyone.

“...Odina.”

“What is it? Do you get it now, little sister?”

“You’re such an idiot!!”

“...Huh?”

“You’re such an idiot, I said. You blockhead!! You dunce!!”

Miyako’s stern look drove Odina back a step.

“You act like a good little servant and work till you drop, but tell me this: will the *amazing* and *powerful* Reinhardt family be there for you when you need it?!”

“I, er, well... Could you keep your voice down? I’m something of a professional when it comes to spying, so I’m just letting you know, but the Hamiltons will find you!”

“Like I care! I never should have written you that letter.”

Miyako removed an envelope from her pocket. She wrote it before coming to the Hamilton mansion.

“Stay out of my way! I’ve decided to look Fuuka-chan in the eyes and tell her how important she is to me, how much I love her.”

She shoved the envelope at Odina and made her exit.

She had shouted too loudly and worried someone from the Hamilton mansion would find her just like Odina had said. She ran away, without looking back.

Of course, if he had wanted to, Odina could have grabbed Miyako’s arm and kept her there.

“Hey, hold on, Miyako...”

But he didn’t. Or rather, he couldn’t.

Will the amazing and powerful Reinhardt family be there for you when you need it?

Those words stuck in his mind.

She was just a girl from a family of country nobles. While she did

score an engagement to the Reinhardt family's heir through some sort of miracle, she was still just a young woman.

I've worked more than she has; I'm the Reinhardts' spy, I've done more in front of and behind the curtain... Well, mostly behind. I know more about the world. But...

"Will the *amazing* and *powerful* Reinhardt family be there for you when you need it?!"

He couldn't deny the persuasiveness of those words, which gave the impression she had lived through it herself.

I don't mind Klaus, myself. People don't notice because they're distracted by his good looks, but he's quite the good-natured man. He's a nice guy, if you ignore his rough treatment of subordinates and lack of thinking. But, she's right, at this rate...

Odina heaved a sigh.

"...A letter, huh."

Odina carefully opened the envelope that Miyako had thrust at him. Written inside, Miyako asked about his health and made a single request. She detailed a way for the Florence family to flourish without relying on political marriages, even after her departure.

The Florence family's financial difficulties were the reason Odina started to work for the Reinhardts. What would happen if those difficulties went away? Odina imagined a life unburdened by long working hours and his boss's monumental tasks. He saw a life where he only had to worry about himself and his family, and where he could look after himself and those around him. The more he thought, the more he fell in love with the idea.

"Welp, guess I'm going on a round trip to the Atika region. What's that, two days?"

Odina smiled a little. Not his usual cynical smile—

"I wonder if I can get this as paid time off?"

—but instead, the smile of someone with a bright future.

Day 11, Night: The Head Maid and Potatoes

Miyako returned to the house and tiptoed to her bedroom. Umi had curled up into a ball and was fast asleep, snoring gently. *This water spirit is getting more and more cat-like by the day.*

Miyako changed her clothes and let her hair down. *I need to get some sleep and then think about my rescue plan for tomorrow... Although, I think I'll just go in guns blazing anyway.*

When she thought of Fuuka, still in that crude shed, she cursed the freezing weather outside. Something else was troubling her too.

"I'd better have a chat with her."

She went downstairs and into the kitchen. Inside sat the woman she was after.

"Susie."

"Welcome back, Lady Miyako."

"I saw my brother in the Hamilton family's garden."

"...Oh."

The head maid, who had served the Florence family for many years, sat quietly peeling vegetables.

I wonder if that's for tomorrow's breakfast. But why's she doing that this late in the night? There's no need to do it now.

She continued to peel the vegetables in silence, as though she were killing time so that she could talk with Miyako.

"Why did you tell him, Susie?"

The head maid was strict, but she was kind as well, and she had always let Miyako have her own way. *So why would she tell on me?*

An example of letting Miyako have her way happened when she was still Klaus Reinhardt's fiancée. At that time, she utilized to the fullest her knowledge of the in-game events before they happened, an advantage she gained from being reborn into a game she knew. Making the most of that advantage, Miyako pulled every kind of trick on Klaus.

Once, Susie caught her red-handed while she was planning more pranks and tricks for Klaus, using her knowledge of the game's scenarios. When that happened, Susie burst out laughing.

"My lady, this is... quite exhilarating, isn't it?"

The head maid, who always maintained an air of decency, bent over in fits of laughter. She laughed like it was the best thing she had

ever seen.

To say she was a prudish woman would be an understatement. But there was also a side of her that found joy in little rebellions against authority. And whenever she scolded someone, she would do it in her own words, looking them in the eye as she gave them hell.

So why would she do this? Why would she rat me out to Odina and get him to stop me?

"It seems I lost my composure a little," she said quietly.

She peeled a potato, sliced up and washed the pieces, then started again, all in silence. With no break in her movement, she continued.

"I knew that you were always looking at a world only you could see, and fighting things invisible to the rest of us. I've served the Florence family to a good old age, and I wanted to avoid any misfortune befalling them at all costs."

She spoke in hushed tones.

"Sorry, but I..." said Miyako, hanging her head. *No matter what my brother or Susie say, I have no intention of stopping.* "Even so, Susie. As a Florence, I really am grateful for all your service to our family. But..."

"But *what*, I wonder? Are you going to tell me I ought to live my own life?"

"I... You're right, that would be disrespectful."

"No, I thank you for your concern."

In the nighttime kitchen, the light from the moon and the lamps glinted off the knife Susie held. The potatoes dropped into a bowl of water one after another, with a *plop*.

"But, my lady, I *have* lived my own life. I've worked in this house all these years without ever finding a husband, but even I have done that."

"Susie?"

"So, even after seeing Odina-sama, you're still going to go your own way?"

"Yeah, that's the plan."

"All right," said Susie. "In that case, I won't stop you. If the Florence family disowns you, we might not see any more of each other. But until then, I'll be here if you need me."

"Susie, does that mean...?"

"I apologize for eavesdropping. 'We'll live happily together, as two women.' There was a time when I held that dream too."

"Huh?"

The sound of Susie clapping her hands rang out. When Miyako looked, she realized all the potatoes from the tabletop had transformed into finely cut strips.

"I've made too many slices. Well, my lady, do you mind making a start on the fried potatoes tomorrow morning?"

“We’re having them all day?!”

“Yes. Potatoes are one of the Atika region’s proud specialties, after all,” laughed Susie.

Miyako would be lying if she said she wasn’t interested in Susie’s past. But it would be rude to try to pry out a story like the one Shan Li and Maria had volunteered themselves.

“I’m looking forward to them. Good night, Susie.”

“All right. Good night, Lady Miyako.”

One day, I want to hear her story, thought Miyako as she made her way to her bedroom.

Day 12: Intuition and Rain Clouds

The servants who brought Fuuka's meager meals to the shed were acting strange. The reason Fuuka came to that conclusion was simple—exceedingly simple.

"Ahem, ahem!"

That reason was their coughing. As they brought her food, clothes, and warm towels to clean herself, the servants suffered bouts of coughing. There could be no clearer sign that they were unwell.

"So, are you all right? Have you seen a doctor?"

"The Count did call for a doctor. He said he didn't know the cause, so I must be all right."

"I don't think that's the right conclusion to draw!"

"...I shouldn't stay talking to you for too long, Fuuka-sama. Oh, that reminds me," she said, handing Fuuka a small glass. *"I couldn't bring you a vase, so please take this instead."*

"That's plenty. Thank you very much."

Fuuka took the glass from her and stroked it lovingly.

The servant excused herself and departed in a hurry.

Owing to her long stay in the dark shed, Fuuka squinted when the door opened, but she noticed the same red rash on the servant's neck as the one on the young maid the day before.

...That rash doesn't sit right with me.

Fuuka filled the glass with water from a jug. *A rash in a line on the neck. Now where have I seen that before?* She took the lily—

I know I've seen it somewhere.

—and with care, placed it in the glass. When she finished, the light from the window illuminated the white lily in all its purity.

Fuuka thought, *That rash definitely spells trouble. This isn't just a hunch. I'm almost certain.* It was intuition grounded in her countless hours of studying white magic and healing.

Before I spent time with Miyako, I might have blotted out this intuition and ignored it, pretending I hadn't seen anything. But Miyako said she loved me for being a hard worker. She was so pleased that there were people I saved with my healing skills.

Happiness, fun... Miyako taught me that saving someone through my own actions, instead of holding back like I used to, could inspire such warm emotions.

"...Is anybody there?" shouted Fuuka.

After a life of keeping quiet and doing what she was told, Fuuka raised her voice.

“Could somebody please bring me the books from my room?!”

What’s the harm in a few books? thought Dan, the head of the Hamilton family. He assented without much thought, paying more attention to the weather outside. He didn’t anticipate that the books in Fuuka’s possession regarding white magic and the related studies of herbal medicines and treatments would amount to around three hundred volumes.

“Is this the last book?”

“Ye—*Ahem, ahem*—Yes, my lady.”

“You have the cough too... You should go home for the day.”

“But, the Count!”

“Do as I say!”

Fuuka cut the servant’s mumbling short with a blunt order and shut the shed door. She sat down in front of the mountain made of three hundred books.

She read, and turned a page, and read and read, then turned another page. She thumbed the index, read, searched, read.

Infections. Respiratory illnesses starting from a cough. A red rash in a line on the neck.

“It’s likely an infectious disease. It eluded the doctors, so it must be an exceptionally rare case.”

She searched and searched and searched.

“...H-Here it is!”

She found a small entry hidden among the pages of a thick book which told of a plague that spread several hundred years ago. *An epidemic of decapitation fever.* The initial symptoms were a red rash that circled the sufferer’s neck, coughing, and difficulty breathing. During an incubation period of a few weeks, the disease would dramatically worsen. Fatality rates were high. In the presence of a patient in the late stage of the disease, the infection rates underwent exponential growth.

“I have to do something!”

Fuuka remembered about moonlight grass, the panacea they discovered in the Atika region. That was her ray of hope, but she had none here.

I need to find a way out of here first. I have to tell them about this.

Fuuka jumped to her feet.

Beyond the window, dark clouds hung heavy in the sky.

Day 13, Early Morning: Men and Women

Miyako stood in front of a mirror wearing an extravagant dress. She tied her hair up and put on accessories. Then she topped the look off with lipstick. Her red dress complemented her auburn hair.

“Miyako, you have an intimidating look in your eyes,” said Umi.

“Yeah, I’m all pumped up. This is going to be a once-in-a-lifetime confession, after all.”

“And that’s what you want?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Then all that’s left for me is to support you.”

“Who was it that let her walk out again?”

“Nyahaha, nyo sulking. I will lend a helping hand to you in what you want to do, my master. And I’ll do what I can as a water spirit... But expecting that kind of emotional sensitivity from us is a typical human conceit.”

“Sensitivity, eh?”

“At the very least, you enjoyed all those warm yet tepid days in that cabin with her, but even you couldn’t put a nyame to your feelings.”

Miyako looked at the Undine that they happened to unearth, the fluffball that would surely come to her aid if Miyako wished for it, her Persian cat. *Thinking about what we’re about to do, I couldn’t be more relieved to have her by my side.*

“Hey, Umi?”

“What is it, my master?”

“I order you as your master: prepare for rubs!”

“Nyawah?!”

Miyako gave Umi her daily dose of rubs.

All right, time for a fight. Now’s my once-in-a-lifetime shot to snatch up my beloved villainess Fuuka Hamilton in the open for all to see, fair and square, face to face.

Beyond the window, rain began to fall.

Meanwhile, at the Hamilton mansion.

Fuuka struggled as servants pinned her down and forced her into

a carriage.

“Please, call for a doctor!”

“Keep her still! Tie her up if you have to, but get her into the carriage!”

“Listen to me! We need to do something about the plague—”

Thump. There was a dull sound, and Fuuka’s body went limp. The carriage sped away.

The Hamilton family directed all its manpower and funds towards the river management project, and their carriages formed a line stretching as far as the eye could see. Red rashes ran in lines across the necks of the attendants on board.

Furthermore...

“My lord, we should arrive at the Enot River on schedule.”

“Hmph, that damned Fuuka. My bastard daughter hasn’t made this easy... *Hrrgh.*”

“My lord?”

“*Koff, koff.*”

“Are you all right?!”

“*Ahem...* I’m fine. I can’t afford to miss this project.”

Fuuka’s father, current head of the Hamilton family, was Dan Hamilton.

“Speed it up. Everything must be in perfect order when we greet Reinhardt-sama.”

On his neck too, there was a dark red rash and cold sweat.

Meaner-while.

“Ah, I don’t want to be here.”

A line of carriages several times the length of the Hamiltons’, each adorned with the most extravagant decorations, drove down the city streets. Inside one of them, Klaus Reinhardt stared listlessly out the window.

“Why do *I* have to represent Father at the river management’s prayer ceremony?”

With blond hair and blue eyes, he was the very picture of a handsome noble.

“Ohh, what do I do? What am I supposed to do if my one true love Miyako goes to the mansion looking for me while I’m out here? You agree with me, don’t you, spy?”

There was no reply.

“Hm? Oh, that’s right, the sly bastard’s on vacation.”

The Reinhardt family’s spy wasn’t present to act out his master’s ridiculous requests as he usually would. Therefore Klaus headed to the Enot River alone, the same destination on the outskirts of the capital that the Hamiltons were dragging Fuuka to.

The Enot River was the largest in the kingdom, and it flooded almost every year. If they managed to succeed with the river management project, making the nearby land suitable for growing crops, that itself would be an outstanding achievement and expand the nation's power.

The Reinhardts of high nobility were determined to play a pivotal role in the facilitation of the river management project. That was the plan the brainiacs of the Reinhardt household concocted.

"I just want to go home. I'm a little pissed at him for not finding Miyako... but it's just not the same without my spy."

In this world, power was a privilege bestowed upon its wielders at birth. He was not only a noble, but a member of the higher nobility—and on top of that, a man. Klaus Reinhardt never questioned any of it. He didn't consider these to be things he was proud of or relied on. Those who wielded power never noticed the strength it gave them.

So, to Klaus, there was nothing strange about his former fiancée Fuuka Hamilton being forced to risk her life giving prayers at the river ceremony like a sacrifice—no, *as* a sacrifice. Klaus also saw nothing amiss about his unwavering, self-centered conviction that the other fiancée he'd dumped, Miyako Florence, still wanted to marry him. None of that mattered to Klaus Reinhardt.

The carriages drove on.

Meanest-while.

A strand of blue light raced across the capital's rainy sky like a comet. That comet was the divine figure of an Undine in the form of a large tiger, her fur a clear mountain stream.

On her back rode Miyako in a dark red dress, its frills dancing in the wind like flames.

Their destination: the Enot River.

The final battle was just around the corner.

Day 13, Noon: Rescue and Proposal

The Enot River was a large river that ran through the land to the north of the capital city Ode.

The river's source was on the sacred mountain Abukust, north of the capital, and it fed into the great sea east of the capital. Grand canals, constructed many generations before, carried its water to the capital. With pleasant weather and a full river, the water looked graceful. Yet, the river could be violent, particularly downstream.

The land in the region around the watershed where the river forked boasted excellent soil, but the floods every couple of years left the crop harvest unreliable. Crops would not grow without water from irrigation, so whenever the river flooded, nobody could harvest crops.

Many had tried to control the Enot River, but neither engineering nor magic had yet overcome the scale and difficulty of the task. For that reason, on occasion some called the Enot River "The Pajan Empire's Sole Surviving Dragon." In the face of that gigantic natural calamity, the people came to hold a certain ceremony, essentially for their own peace of mind. They called it "The Maiden's Prayers."

"In the names of the glorious Marquis Reinhardt and Count Hamilton, I hereby offer my prayers to the river."

At the large watershed of the Enot River, the river swelled from the rain that had started the night before. The muddy current collided with the watershed and writhed like a giant two-headed snake.

Fuuka Hamilton stood in the center of all of that. The river threatened to break from its course and engulf her at any moment, but she continued to sing her prayers solemnly. In her mind were thoughts of Miyako.

How happy I would be if Miyako came here to save me... But if I do this right, Miyako will be free. I have to see it through.

If Fuuka succeeded in pacifying the river, the Reinhardts would look favorably on the Hamilton family, and one of Fuuka's sisters might become Klaus Reinhardt's wife. Even if she were his wife on paper only, that would be enough to allow Dan to achieve his goal. If that came to pass, Miyako wouldn't have to worry about Klaus resenting her or chasing after her in his obsession.

In the end, even Klaus was just a piece in play on the board of

high society. A larger piece than others, perhaps, but a piece nonetheless.

Fuuka raised her eyes to the riverbank. Above the towering heights of the bank, there was a safe zone, beyond the reach of the river. She saw drenched servants holding up large tents and umbrellas. Her father and Klaus Reinhardt sat beneath their protection. Klaus was letting his gaze wander in boredom. He didn't even try to conceal his yawns.

I expect he doesn't care in the least what happens to me. And even if he snubs his future wife, that'll probably just be played off as the "fun and games of an heir to a great family." Really, can you think of anything more ridiculous?

Whatever the case, I can't run from here. No, I won't. Because that's what I decided, and that's what's best for Miyako, thought Fuuka.

Fuuka's recitation of the prayer resounded through the air. The muddy torrent rumbled and thundered, almost but not quite drowning out Fuuka's voice.

The members of the Reinhardt and Hamilton families watching from the safe zone lost all interest in observing the ritual and began to enjoy a banquet. To them, this ceremony was about politics and improving their family's standing.

The skies were gray, and the wine passing between the families was red.

Fuuka caught sight of a great rampaging snake. No, what she had thought was a snake was actually the surging torrent from the Enot River, the largest yet by far. The amount of water and its violent force were like a flash flood.

Fuuka shut her eyes at the sight of the overwhelming deluge racing downstream. *Ah, this is the end.* The current would surely engulf the altar Fuuka stood on and the sandbank around it.

Perhaps a first-rate mage could have resisted the colossal flow, but a mere noble lady like Fuuka had no chance.

Could Fuuka have avoided this if she had made the most of her dedication to the intellectual pursuit of white magic and chosen a path of independence as a healer or a doctor? Regardless, it was her own choice to carry the hopes of the Hamilton family as the villainess on a stage of political marriages. She had rebuked the other ladies for their lack of effort and exploited the insurmountable difference in power to crush them.

If Fuuka had run somewhere far away with Miyako, would she still have ended up standing here? Regardless, it was her own choice to set Miyako free. Fuuka returned to the capital for the sake of the first person who held out their hand to her.

She thought that everything had been her own choice, but Fuuka

realized now how few choices in her life she had actually made for herself. *They were all for someone else's sake. Is there really nothing that I've chosen to do through my own will and for my own sake?*

No, there is one, and only one thing I took for myself: Miyako's hand. Fuuka's auburn-haired rival had shown up unannounced in the Hamilton mansion, by the window where the curtains shook and the morning light shone through. *Taking her hand, Miyako's hand, I'm sure that's the first and only thing I've ever chosen for myself.*

Goodbye, Miyako.

Fuuka Hamilton closed her eyes.

Just then.

"Fuuka-chaaaan!!!"

A voice rained down from above the bustling riverbank. Fuuka opened her eyes, and before her—

"Fuuka-chan, sorry for the wait!!"

"...Huh?"

—stood Miyako Florence, wearing a crimson dress elegantly embroidered with ribbons and lace. Her face was beautifully made-up, and her chestnut hair was arranged in a delicate up-do.

Miyako grasped Fuuka's hand tightly.

"Miyako, why are you here?! And what happened to the river...?!"

"My word, my master really knows how to put a water spirit to work."

"Umi!"

"A tiny little stream like this is but a mouse's tail to me," said Umi with a yawn.

Having carried Miyako here on her back, Umi stood in the path of the river in her true form, her mane of watery fish fins fluttering on her translucent body. The muddied flow halted before Umi, as though time had stopped.

"Umi, go on!"

"Nyaa, very well."

Umi tapped the motionless river with the tip of her nose. When she did, the maelstrom of a river reverted to a gentle stream with a silly *splooosh* sound, without even causing any spray.

The complete shattering of the laws of physics took Fuuka's breath away. The same could be said of the members of the two families looking down on Fuuka from the riverbank.

"W-Who the hell are you?!" yelled Dan Hamilton. He stood up, his face dark with rage at the sudden turn of events. The red rash on his neck had spread further.

"I'm Miyako Florence! I've come to save Fuuka-chan!!" shouted Miyako back at him, sending her crimson dress swirling.

Recognizing her, Klaus jumped to his feet without thinking.

“Is that Miyako? I knew you’d come back to me. And getting all dressed up as well! You really *did* miss me!!”

You’re so optimistic! I don’t know where you get all that confidence from.

Miyako turned to face Klaus and his broad smile—

“Yuck, what? I have no idea what you’re talking about! Maybe cut down on the narcissism, you stupid poser!!”

“Wh-What?!”

—and shot him down, then turned back to Fuuka.

Thanks to the Undine’s protection, the river maintained its calm despite the falling rain. Miyako pinched the hem of her crimson dress and looked Fuuka in the eye.

“Fuuka-chan, just like I promised, I’ve come to sa... No, that’s not it. I’ve come to confess my feelings to you one more time!!”

“But, why? I told you to run. I did take your hand once, but then I cast it away.”

“That’s not it! I want to start things over, and I don’t want to just spring it on you like last time...”

I burst into her mansion, got caught up in the moment and spent thirteen days running away with Fuuka-chan. But this time I won’t try to catch her off guard or force my way in; I’ll do it fair and square in front of everyone.

“Fuuka-chan, you work harder than anyone else. You’re patient and kind. You’re not great at cooking, but you go all out to help other people. You can speak Continental like a native. You’re tough on yourself and just as tough on others, but even then, you think of others before yourself... and I love you!”

Miyako raised her dignified voice so that everyone there could hear. Not worried about muddying the hem of her dress, Miyako knelt before Fuuka and held out her hand.

“I don’t mind if you don’t take my hand. But I decided I had to put my feelings into words.”

“Miyako, I...”

“And because this is such an important conversation, I wanted to look as cool as I could when I met you... so I put on this dress. How do I look?”

“...You idiot.”

“Yep, that’s me.”

“You really are such an idiot; you don’t think things through.”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re doing this right in front of the Reinhardts... If you’d dealt with them properly, you could have lived the rest of your life in peace.”

“Yeah.”

“...And it’s impossible for two women to go through life without relying on their family or men. It’s impossible to find happiness that way,” said Fuuka, forcing the words out. That was the curse that had always limited Fuuka’s actions.

This world, and noble society in particular, belong to men and noble families. Women living without their protection tread a hopeless path. The most they can do is enter a monastery and live out their days as nuns. Women are powerless in this world.

When Fuuka finished, Miyako slowly shook her head.

“You’re wrong.”

“...What?”

“Happiness comes in all sorts of different shapes. We just never noticed.”

The traveling merchant from the Continent, Shan Li, her partner Maria, and their treasured daughter Aisha showed Miyako a different kind of family. *I want Fuuka-chan to see them as a family*, thought Miyako.

“And maybe there are people who’ve given up on happiness, and they’re still regretting that today.”

Miyako remembered the unmarried head maid Susie. Miyako had peeked inside the pendant she carried around her neck, and found an old portrait of a beautiful young lady. *I’m sure that girl still has a home in Susie’s heart*. Although Susie had warned Miyako against going after Fuuka, she still gave Miyako this dress in pristine condition. Miyako wanted Fuuka to meet her too.

“So I don’t want to hear that two women can’t be happy together. I mean, it’s *us* we’re talking about. I know that the two of us can find happiness together, Fuuka-chan!!”

“I...!”

Fuuka’s eyes widened at what Miyako said. She lowered them as they began to well with tears, and took Miyako’s hand.

“Don’t blame me if you come to regret this.”

“That’ll never happen, Fuuka-chan!!!”

Miyako smiled in the pouring rain. Fuuka couldn’t help but smile back at her.

But then.

“Enough of this...!!”

They heard a yell from the riverbank.

“Enough of this, both of you... Stop getting in my... *Koff, koff...?!*”

“D-Did he just collapse?!”

Halfway through his enraged outburst, Dan fell to the muddy ground, grasping in pain at his neck and the fierce rash there. Then, as though following his lead—

“M-My lord, are yo—*koff*.”

“Hack, hack, hack.”

“Hrrrgh!”

—the Hamilton family’s servants erupted into coughing, until one by one, they collapsed.

“Wh-What’s going on? This is one of those *bad* things, right? Somebody fetch my spy!!!”

“Your spy is on vacation, my lord.”

“Oh, that’s right!!”

With that, Klaus visibly began to panic; that was how unusually every member of the Hamilton family’s retinue was acting.

“This is... As I expected, that rash is decapitation fever.”

Fuuka gulped.

“Decapitation fever? What happens now?!”

“Outbreaks of the disease are incredibly rare, but if there’s even a single person who’s caught it, the spread is astronomical... There are reports that it has destroyed entire towns and cities.”

“You’re kidding?!”

“At any rate, we have to do something...” said Fuuka, biting her lip.

After all he’s done to you, you’re better off just leaving your father to his fate, thought Miyako, but she kept that to herself. Fuuka would want to save anyone, whoever they happened to be. That was what made her the woman Miyako loved. *Besides, we can give him a piece of our minds just as easily after he shakes off his decapitation fever.*

My brother better make it here in time...

Miyako looked off into the distance.

“Umi, I need your help!” said Fuuka.

“Nyaa. So be it, I’ll help you. After all, you are now my master’s other half.”

Umi, the beautiful Undine, placed Miyako and Fuuka on her back and elegantly took flight.

Day 13, Noon: Reinforcements and Suck it, Assholes!

Umi descended to the ground without a sound, carrying on her back Miyako in her swaying crimson dress and Fuuka in her pure-white ceremonial garb.

The Reinhardt family's retinue yelped at the sight.

Of course they did; that was the natural reaction. The creature carrying Miyako and Fuuka looked like no magical creature they had ever seen. She had a translucent body, undulating dorsal fin, and a jewel buried in her forehead. Amongst the guards present were several with knowledge of black magic, white magic, summoning, and other arcane arts, but none had ever witnessed a beast like Umi.

Fright and confusion gripped the onlookers. The old books spoke of one such creature.

"That form... and the power to stop the flood in its tracks... No, this can't be."

"A water spirit? But only the best in the country could possibly form a contract with one of the four great spirits!"

Shrill whispers spread throughout the crowd. Even the Hamilton family forgot their panic over Dan's sudden collapse and joined in.

They had always treated Fuuka like dirt despite her position as eldest daughter, using her illegitimate birth as their excuse. But now, that same Fuuka stood before them on the back of a mysterious creature—a powerful water spirit.

"...Nyaa."

"Oh nooo!!"

Umi's meows drove the crowd to screams.

She's going to take her revenge on us!

Though Fuuka's abysmal treatment hadn't been their choice, the servants knew it wasn't right. At the very least, they hadn't treated her the way a lady should be treated. They would never normally confine a lady to a garden shed.

"M-My lady, we..." began a maid as the rain poured down, her voice trembling. She was clearly about to plead her case.

Fuuka ignored her and shouted.

"Nobody move!"

"*Whaa!*" The crowd stirred.

"Everyone, your necks!" said Miyako, following Fuuka's lead.

“Oh *God*,” wailed the servants. “We’re next’!!”

“No, like, the one between your shoulders and your head...”

“Everyone calm down. I want you all to inspect each other’s necks to check whether you have the same red rash as Dan Hamilton,” said Fuuka, rushing to Miyako’s aid.

“Y-Yeah, what she said!”

“I want those of you with the rash to line up here. There’s a chance it’s decapitation fever.”

Shouts erupted from the retinue.

“D-Decapitation fever?!”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

“I-I’ve seen that term once, when I was at school to become a healer... If I remember, there are legends of the devastation it caused.”

They fearfully checked each other’s necks, and a scream followed each discovery of a red rash. The number of infected surpassed Fuuka’s expectations, and even several from the Reinhardt retinue joined the Hamiltons in front of Miyako and Fuuka.

Miyako scolded a few of the people without symptoms for trying to escape.

“Stop! You might still be in the incubation period, so don’t go running off!!!”

Her threatening tone froze them in place. Among them was the heir to Marquis Reinhardt, Klaus.

“Ha, hahaha... I wasn’t, er, *running off*, per se... I was going to get help, honey.”

“Who are you calling ‘*honey*’?! Our engagement’s dead and buried. You should know; *you* killed it!”

Although it was Miyako who put the knife in his hand.

But Klaus didn’t back down, even this late in the game.

“But you came back to me, right? If you really insist, I might give you another chance to be my bri—”

“Rot in hell.”

She cut him down. Miyako didn’t want to waste any of the precious little time they had left dealing with idiots.

With Fuuka leading them, the retinue began to recover some semblance of order amidst the confusion. Dan lay motionless where he’d fallen, gasping for air.

Fuuka heaved a sigh.

“...Now then, let’s start the treatment.”

She wouldn’t abandon anybody, no matter who they were. She would do her best to save them. That was the true nature of the villainess, Fuuka Hamilton.

Under the protection of the Undine's healing powers, Fuuka made rapid progress on the treatment. She coordinated with those among the retinue who had knowledge of healing. Fuuka kept watch over the entire scene and delivered appropriate orders as the situation developed.

As Miyako had a contract with an Undine, her role was to summon the water spirit's power and direct it towards Fuuka. The cool, blue light enveloping her crimson dress gave Miyako an air of divinity.

The Reinhardt family's head butler called out to her nervously.

"Excuse me, Lady Miyako?"

"Hmm? What is it? I'm a little busy burning Fuuka acting all heroic into my memory, if you don't mind."

"Nyahaa."

"Oh my! The water spirit speaks? I-I'm terribly sorry!"

"Come on, there's no need to grovel! So, what do you want?"

"R-Right... It would very much please me if you would give some more thought to an engagement with Klaus."

"Oh, this again? I'm fed up with hearing about it!! You might not have noticed, but I have a thing going with Fuuka-chan?!"

"But now that you've formed a contract with an Undine, one of the four great spirits, you will be given the title of Exceptional Noble!"

"Oh?"

"Exceptional Noble is a glorious title bestowed upon individuals who have displayed great power or skill, regardless of their lineage. You can't pass the title on to your children, but you have the potential to stand on even footing with the Six Great Noble Families, including the Reinhardt family... In fact, in some circumstances you might attain more honor than even that..."

"So?"

"Please, I beg you, reconsider an engagement into the Reinhardt family! The truth is, Klaus views Lady Fuuka Hamilton affectionately."

"What?!!!"

What's so affectionate about dragging her out to a ritual in the freezing rain and making her a living sacrifice?

"And he's making arrangements to begin negotiations for a marriage between her and the head of the most-esteemed Hickes family, foremost of the Six Great Noble Families and the most glorious of all."

"You mean the same head of the Hickes family who turned sixty-nine this year?! The one famous for being a lecherous old freak?!!!!"

That's it, I'm done. This is going nowhere. If Fuuka ever married that old lech, I think I'd fly into a rage so fierce that I wouldn't just stop at flooding the capital. I'm already pissed even hearing it said. They treat

people like objects.

Just as Miyako was about to shout “How *dare* you do that to my Fuuka-chan?”, she heard Fuuka calling her name.

“Miyako!”

“Wh-What’s wrong, Fuuka-chan? Need a hand?”

“Yes. I’ve dealt with the people who didn’t have symptoms, but the ones with symptoms... It might be too late for them.”

“...Your father?”

“Yes,” nodded Fuuka.

To Miyako’s surprise, Fuuka’s expression was calm.

Dan Hamilton lay moaning, covered in mud. There was no longer any trace of the dignity a proud head of a noble family ought to have.

“No, please... Fuuka, hhhelb me... I raised you eben though you were a basdard... Hhhave you forgodden thad?”

“That’s not some trump card you can pull out whenever you feel like it!” Miyako said.

“Wh-What?!”

Miyako remembered how he’d mistreated Fuuka, as well as her innocent attempts to satisfy him, and the words rose up unbeckoned.

“She *said* she can’t treat you. And even if Fuuka-chan could, it’s up to her whether she does or not.”

“...Miyako.”

Fuuka mouthed a word of thanks. Her voice was the faintest of whispers, but it reached Miyako.

“Besides, I’m not sure whether we can effectively keep others from developing it. At least here we have Umi; Undines are the embodiment of healing, so thanks to her protection it’s not so bad, but elsewhere...”

“So what’s the plan?”

“If only we had the all-purpose medicinal herb we found in the Atika region. If we had moonlight grass...”

Fuuka clenched her fists. *I want to save the people here. If only we had the herb that grew where Miyako and I stayed—moonlight grass, the panacea that cured Shan Li’s daughter Aisha of her illness.*

At that moment, Miyako broke into a smile.

“...Heh heh.”

“Miyako, it’s not funny.”

This is serious... We’re trying to figure out how to stop a pandemic, thought Fuuka, losing her temper.

“That’s not it. Listen, Fuuka-chan.”

“Listen to what?”

Fuuka pricked up her ears, which heard a slight vibration.

“Heeeey, little SIS-ter!”

From the distance—

“Yippee! Strapping ten fast horses to a carriage really gets you places quick!” shouted Shan Li.

—came the beating of hooves and the rumbling of wheels.

“Look, Mom, Mama! There’s Miyako-sama and Fuuka-sama!”

“Keep your head inside the carriage, Aisha, it’s dangerous,” warned Maria.

Fuuka recognized their voices. Odina Florence waved his hand from inside the carriage heading towards them with thundering hoofbeats.

“Is that Shan Li-san?! And Odina-san too!”

“Heh heh. The truth is, I called them out to help with our escape. In exchange, I offered them all the moonlight grass you picked last time.”

Odina held the letter Miyako wrote for him. Black bags rested beneath his eyes, the result of a full-speed mad dash in a ten-horse carriage from the Atika region to the Enot River. They parked the carriage a little distance away to prevent the rough waters from scaring the horses.

“Odinaaa!! How much moonlight grass did you get inside the carriage?!”

Shan Li answered Miyako instead.

“This much!” she said, raising a hand and stretching out her fingers.

Miyako felt her hopes fade away.

“Five? That’s all?”

“As if! You obviously don’t know many dependable Continental merchants like me!” said Shan Li with a cat-like smile. “Fifty plants, roots and all!”

Fuuka almost bit through her tongue in her rush to answer, her voice shrill with excitement.

“I’ll purchase them all!!!”

“Oh yeah? ◎ × % \$ # # * # ~?!”

Shan Li said something in Continental—

“Really now, × ◎ & \$!”

—and Fuuka answered her fluently.

A smile crept across Shan Li’s face.

“Deal. I’ll throw in some extras too.”

“Thank you very much... I can make more than enough medicine now,” said Fuuka, clutching her chest in relief.

Behind them, Klaus caught sight of Odina and raised his voice.

“You? What’s my spy doing here?!”

“Oh God, *he’s* here too!”

“Hey, is that any way to talk to your boss?!”

The pitiful working man Odina Florence looked at his boss with

disdain. *It's your fault for being here*, he thought.

"Oh, hold on... Klaus-sama," said Odina, hesitantly pointing a finger at Klaus's neck, "You've got a rash."

"What?!!!"

The first symptom of decapitation fever, a red rash, circled Klaus's neck.

"Oh no! Spy, do something!!"

"Uhh, do *what*, exactly? Oh, by the way, I'm quitting, is that okay? And since I'm quitting, I don't really have any obligation to do what you say..."

"Excuse me?! Do you mean to say you're betraying the Reinhardt family?!"

"Well, come on, the pay isn't all that great..."

"Compared to what? If you can't handle working for us, you won't be able to work anywhere..."

Hearing that, Shan Li raised her hand.

"Over here! He's working for us."

"Who the hell are you? From your outfit... a merchant from the Continent?!"

"That's right. Where I come from, we have a saying: 'Put your money where your mouth is. If you don't pay up, then shut up. If you *do* pay up, still shut up.' Or something like that. So, are you paying enough to butt in about your spy changing jobs?"

Shan Li put on her business smile. By her side, the voluptuous beauty Maria spoke between sighs.

"...Sorry to tell you, but my wife has bought and paid for that man."

"She, er... what?"

"And she paid about *this* much."

Klaus balked at the amount paid and let out a scream.

"This is ridiculous! Sure, he's a spy, but he's still just a servant!"

"No, no, no! He's quick on his feet, and there's no greater virtue than that. Plus, he's built well enough to handle whatever we can throw at him, and most of all, he's so loveable!"

"I'll concede to that, he is loveable! B-But..."

"I'm sorry, but that's how it is, Klaus-sama. So I don't have any particular reason to help you with your disease anymore... I couldn't say no to the high wages and plentiful vacation time!! So long, Klaus-sama. Be well."

"S-Spy?! Do you *see* my neck? What part of it looks *well* to you?! Help me! Ah, that's right, there's the medicinal herb!"

Handed a curt rejection first by the woman he desired, then by his own servant, Klaus Reinhardt screamed in vain.

"I've decocted the moonlight grass. I'll be administering it in

order, so line up! Klaus-sama, Father, that goes for the both of you too.”

After Fuuka’s final sharp rebuke, Dan Hamilton and Klaus Reinhardt joined the servants in the line and awaited their medicine. Dan crawled, while Klaus walked with sunken shoulders.

“Please hhhelb me, Fuuka... Hhhelb your father...” said Dan.

But however much he grasped at Fuuka’s dress or kissed Miyako’s shoes, nobody took any notice. Dan Hamilton’s abusive treatment of Fuuka had, over time, lost him the trust of his servants.

Fuuka carried on with the treatments.

“Hopefully we’ve reduced the risk of any more people developing symptoms quite considerably.”

Dan Hamilton kissed boots, prostrated himself, and finally wept and begged for forgiveness. They flung some medicine at him and finished his treatment. *Now all that’s left is for me and Fuuka-chan to kiss this place goodbye*, thought Miyako with relief.

But just then...

“Wh-Whoa! Miyako, watch out!!” yelled Fuuka.

“Huh?”

Oomph.

Something struck her.

“Nyo, m-master!”

“Miyako!!”

Miyako’s feet left the ground. Turned upside down, she fell from the precipice towards the river Umi had frozen in place.

“If you won’t side with the Reinhardts... then we can’t tolerate the creation of a new Exceptional Noble!”

Confused, Miyako scanned the bank as she fell and saw a man screaming hysterically. Behind his ghastly expression, she recognized him as the Reinhardts’ head butler.

No, this can’t be happening... Mine and Fuuka-chan’s bright and sunny life on the run and our slow days together were just getting started!!!

Collision with the water simultaneously cut short Miyako’s desperate cries and her consciousness.

The voice of Miyako’s beloved villainess penetrated her fading consciousness.

“Miyako, I... Being with you, all those days we spent together, I felt so very happy.”

I had two weeks to make you say you’re happy. When’s the last day? Come to think of it, isn’t it...

Day Fourteen, Final Day: A Promise and a Kiss

Miyako dreamt.

“Hmph. How can you justify trying to become Reinhardt-sama’s bride when you don’t even know *that*? You don’t have what it takes, Miyako Florence!” came a dignified voice.

Miyako was taking part in one of the many balls held during the bridal wars. Next to her was Fuuka Hamilton. With her impeccable manners and perfect, elegant clothing, she stood out from the other ladies.

Fuuka’s behavior in high society was faultless, and her endeavors in politics cold and calculating. In everyone’s eyes, she was a noble; she was the villainess. Fuuka Hamilton was always the strongest, the most beautiful... the loneliest.

That was why Miyako wished to make her happy. The time limit was fourteen days, and this was the morning of the fourteenth day.

Miyako awoke to an unfamiliar ceiling. *I think I read that trope somewhere, in my old life.*

After I fell from the cliff, I thought I was a goner. But I’m alive enough to know one ceiling from another.

Where’s Fuuka-chan? What about the decapitation fever? What happened to everybody?

All that swirled around in Miyako’s mind as she opened her eyes.

“Ugh, ouch.”

My arms feel heavy. And my legs. My whole body feels like a lump... Which means, I’m still alive.

The first thing to enter Miyako’s blurred vision—

“Miyako!”

“F-Fuuka... chan?”

—was a worried look from Fuuka.

Fuuka wrapped her arms around Miyako. The sweet fragrance from her black hair caught Miyako off guard. *You smell so lovely!*

“Wh-Whoa, Fuuka-chan, are you all right?! Are you hurt? And the decapitation fever?!”

“I should be asking *you*!!”

Miyako took in her surroundings. She realized that they were in the Florence family’s second home in the capital. Something warm

and fluffy rested on her lap.

“Umi!”

“Oh, you’re awake, master. You can thank my healing powers as a water spirit.”

“Oh, right. Somebody knocked me off the cliff, and...”

“Nyahaha, you should thank Fuuka as well.”

“Oh yeah! It was the butler. But why did he...”

“She really was a sight to behold.”

“Please, Umi... that’s enough!”

Fuuka blushed. Though hesitant at first, she began to tell Miyako bit by bit about the commotion at the Enot River.

“I sent the Reinhardts’ head butler flying.”

“You did *what?!?*”

“After what he did to you, I *slightly* lost control and... beat the hell out of him.”

“You didn’t!”

Her behavior in high society was faultless, and her endeavours in politics cold and calculating. *And she beat the hell out of him.*

“And nothing happened to you?!”

“No. Fortunately, at that point I hadn’t finished treating Fath... Dan Hamilton’s and Klaus Reinhardt’s decapitation fever. I dangled the moonlight grass treatment in front of them to get my way until they wept and begged for my forgiveness. Of course, I had them scrap that weird marriage arrangement as well. Also, they handed the head butler over to the palatial courts. There are a few influential people at the court who owe me a favor or two, so I put it in the right ears to have the punishment be on the heavier side.”

“Yeesh, so cold and calculating!”

“You never know when the faces you meet in high society will come in useful. I made the right choice never forgetting to send seasonal greeting cards.”

“Ohh, faultless behavior!!”

“...You’re the one that taught me to press on headlong, true to the way I feel and what I believe in.”

Fuuka lowered her face and locked eyes with Miyako, tears welling up.

“I couldn’t help it... I thought you’d died.”

“Fuuka-chan... Oh, that’s right! I fell from the riverbank, how did I...”

“Nyaa. You landed in a river. I’m a very dependable Undine, a great spirit of water. I’ll let you figure out the rest,” said Umi, wagging her fluffy tail.

Oh, that’s how. Umi used her control over all the water to save me.

Fuuka went on.

“After that, we finished the treatment... Then we brought you here in Shan Li-san’s carriage. The head maid Susie-san was very accommodating as well.”

“So you’ve met Susie too.”

“You didn’t look like you’d wake up. We were really worried, you know.”

“Right... Fuuka-chan, thanks for saving me.”

“Fuuka looked after you all nyight without sleeping.”

“U-Umi!!”

“You didn’t have to! After all you’d been through...”

In the downpour at the Enot River, Fuuka had the role of sacrificial prayer giver foisted on her. *She must have been tired enough to collapse from that already, but she still...*

“But I...”

Fuuka spoke as though her actions were the most natural thing in the world.

“But I had to tell you. When you barged into my mansion. When we lived together in Atika. When you showed me different kinds of warmth and taught me how happy you can feel helping others. When you chased after me to the other side of the kingdom... When you held your hand out to me one more time.”

Fuuka gently stroked Miyako’s cheek.

“You know, Miyako, all of that made me realize... I love you.”

On the fourteenth day, the last morning of the promise.

If I can make you say ‘I’m happy’ in fourteen days, I want you to stay with me forever.

On that promised morning, Fuuka Hamilton whispered to Miyako.

“Right now, I really am happy.”

In other words, this was Fuuka’s confession to Miyako: she would stay by her side forever after.

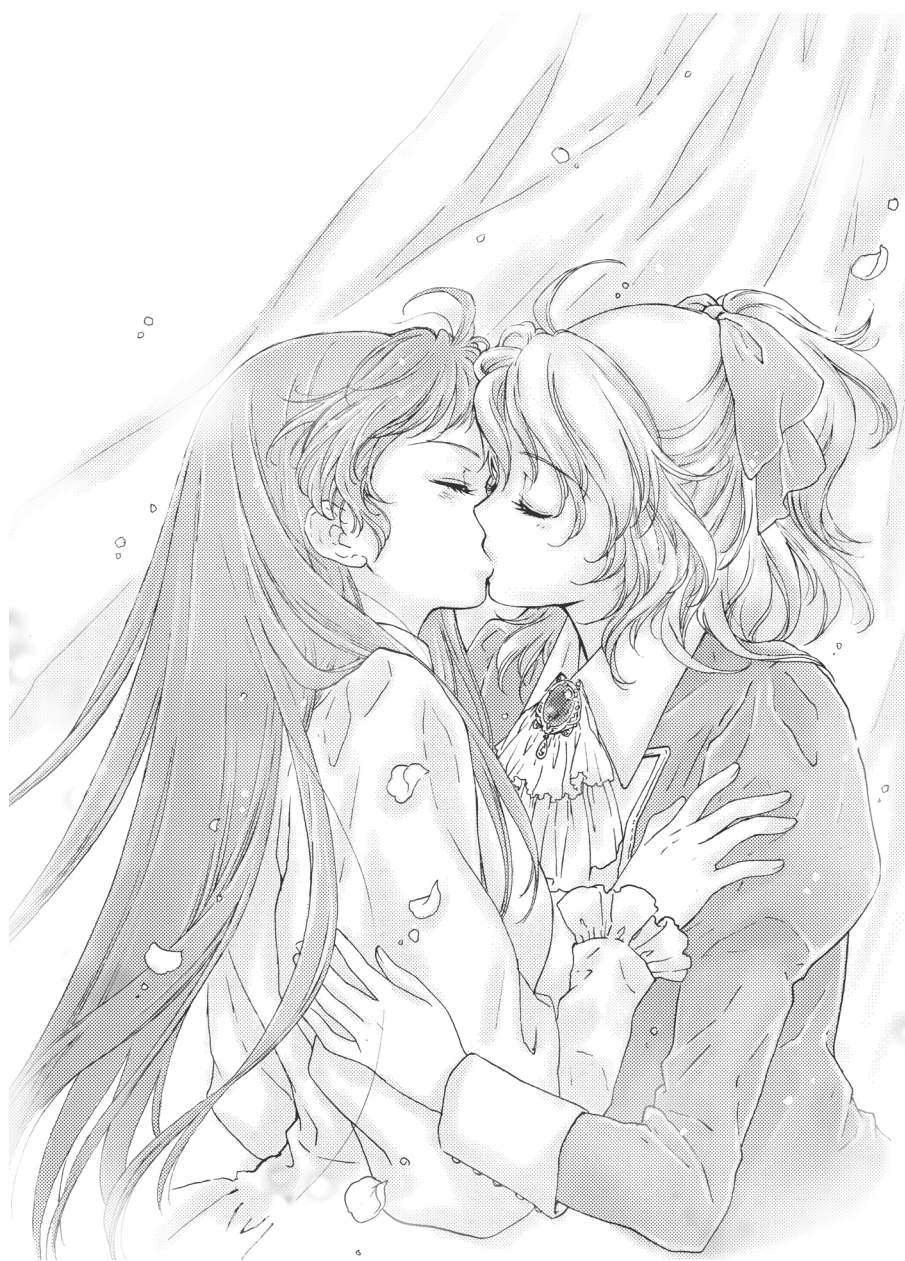
To hide the tears welling up in her eyes—

“Fuuka-chan, let’s be happy together. The two of us can live happily, always.”

—Miyako pressed her lips against Fuuka’s.

Let’s go on a journey to the ends of the world. Let’s go for a picnic among the flowers in a springtime field. Let’s make lovely food and spend nights doing nothing. Let’s live happily together.

The curtains danced in the morning light as they whispered their love to each other.



Epilogue: A Lily Blooms in Another World

Looking out over a broad field of the panacea moonlight grass, Fuuka remembered a day from long ago. She remembered the wind blowing through the curtains, and the gallant, auburn-haired girl who showed up before her. That girl was cheerful to a fault, endlessly positive, and always lucky. She held out her hand to Fuuka as the river surged towards her... but that was now many years in the past.

“Fuuka-chan!”

She heard a familiar, welcome voice. Fuuka slowly turned to look over her shoulder.

There was Miyako, looking more mature and grown-up than the Miyako on that day she remembered. She had tied her reddish-brown hair up, and waved from atop a carriage.

“Nyahaa. Another day of hard work.”

On her lap sat an Undine, one of the four great spirits and master of water... in cat form. Umi gave her tail a sluggish flick.

The black hair which stretched down to Fuuka’s waist swayed in the breeze.

“Welcome back, Miyako.”

“I’m home, Fuuka-chan! We made a killing again today!”

Though there were many ups and downs along the way, Miyako had made a name for herself throughout the kingdom as a traveling merchant. There were no goods she couldn’t sell, and no market she couldn’t break into. That was what people said, and she was skilled enough to justify the praise. Even in regions upset by war or discrimination, the people there would smile when she came to trade. Many called her “The Goddess of the Sun” for her cheerful demeanor—some did, anyway.

“I have to say, Shan Li-san’s customers strike a hard bargain!”

Shan Li, the mysterious traveling merchant and eternal young girl, taught her the ins and outs of the trade.

Shan Li was traveling across the Continent with the wife she loved, the daughter she adored, and a hard-working ex-spy with a self-esteem problem, Odina Florence. The flames of war had died down in her homeland, which was now on the path to recovery. For that reason, she entrusted her customers in Pajan to her student Miyako.

“You say that, but I know you. I’m sure you’re getting along well

with them.”

“Well, more or less.”

Miyako’s carefree smile looked the same as it always had. At the sight, Fuuka felt her own lips break into a grin.

“...Welcome back, Miyako.”

“It’s good to be home, Fuuka-chan.”

They took each other’s hands.

They had successfully cultivated the elusive panacea moonlight grass, and Fuuka was now known as “The Moonlit Saint,” an adept healer. She was all the home Miyako needed.

They had a home on the outskirts of the capital. With two women living there keeping a multitude of spirits, starting with their pet cat—or rather, pet Undine—Umi, the locals began to call their home “Spirit Manor.” But that’s a story for another time.

“I almost forgot; I brought a souvenir back for you, Fuuka-chan.”

“A souvenir?”

“Here.”

“...Ah. I love this flower.”

Miyako handed her a single white lily. The lily was uncommon in this world, but within a few years, Fuuka would perfect a method of cultivation. They would fill every inch of this field, and Miyako would deliver them to every corner of the world.

Pure and white, lilies bloomed in another world.

The End

Afterword

Greetings. Ameko Kaeruda here.

I would like to thank you all for reading *A Lily Blooms in Another World*.

I started uploading to the big web novel site Shōsetsuka ni Narō a few years ago. One day when I checked the rankings, I noticed the word “villainess.”

I knew what that meant: Oh yeah, this is yuri for sure... As it turned out, I was completely wrong.

How strange, I thought, I can so clearly picture a yuri comedy where the spurned villainess falls in love with the main heroine and they run away together.

Time passed, and I held onto my conviction that the villainess exists solely to live happily ever after with the main heroine. I am so pleased to have been able to turn this idea into a book and have it distributed by the yuri specialists at GL Bunko.

This is entirely thanks to the online readers for spotting my work in the digital sea and cheering me on, GL Bunko, Shio Sakura for decorating the story with her beautiful illustrations, and last but not least, you for choosing to read this book. You have my heartfelt gratitude.

I will continue to devote myself to bringing you more stories and more yuri.

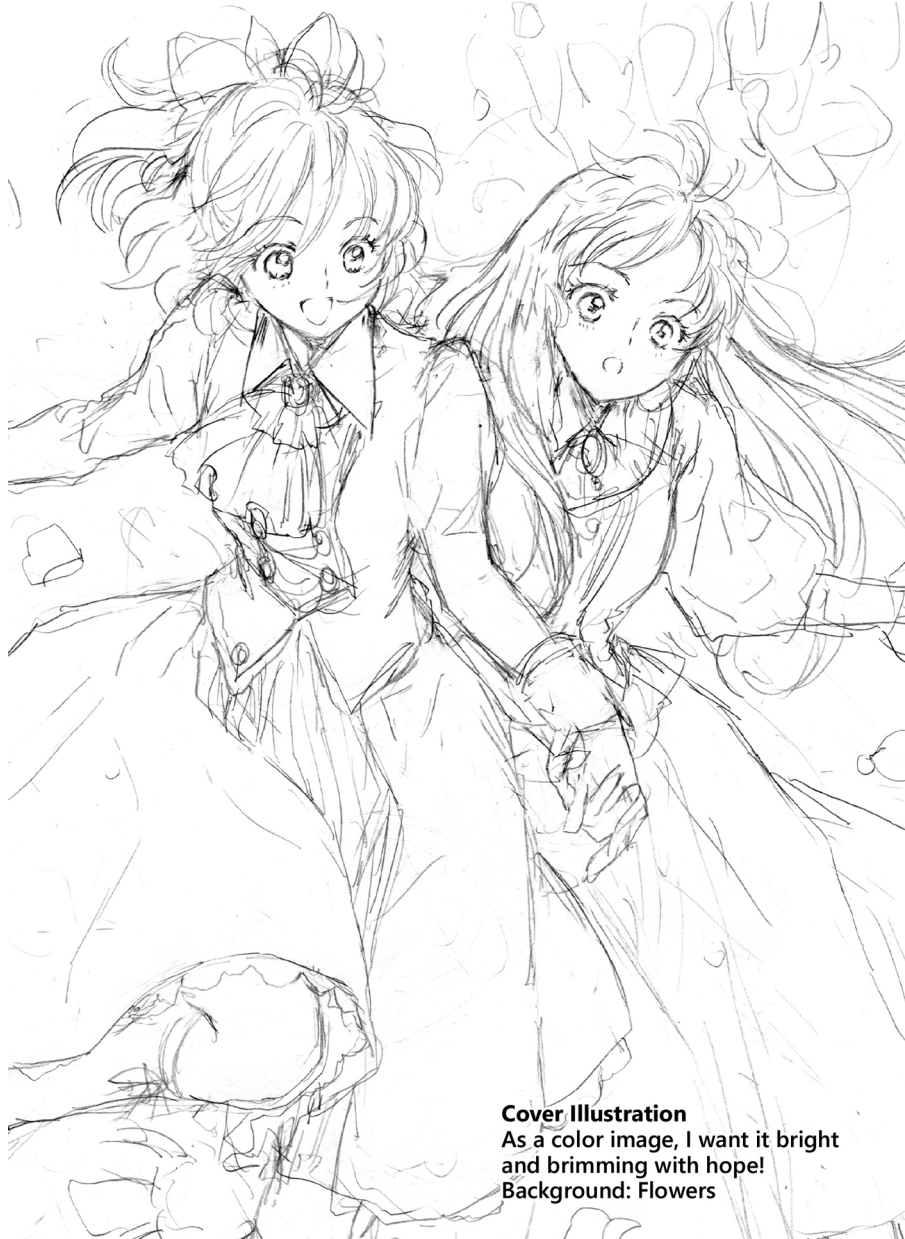
By the way, the stew cooked by putting a hot stone in a bucket and the milk soup that show up in the book are Ameko favorites. I guess I just like soup... *Long live soup*.

But we're getting sidetracked.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed following Miyako and Fuuka's adventures, big and small, and reading a story of two women's love-fueled escape in another world.

Now then, until the next time we meet... Farewell!





Cover Illustration

As a color image, I want it bright
and brimming with hope!

Background: Flowers

Illustration 1
Character introduction image



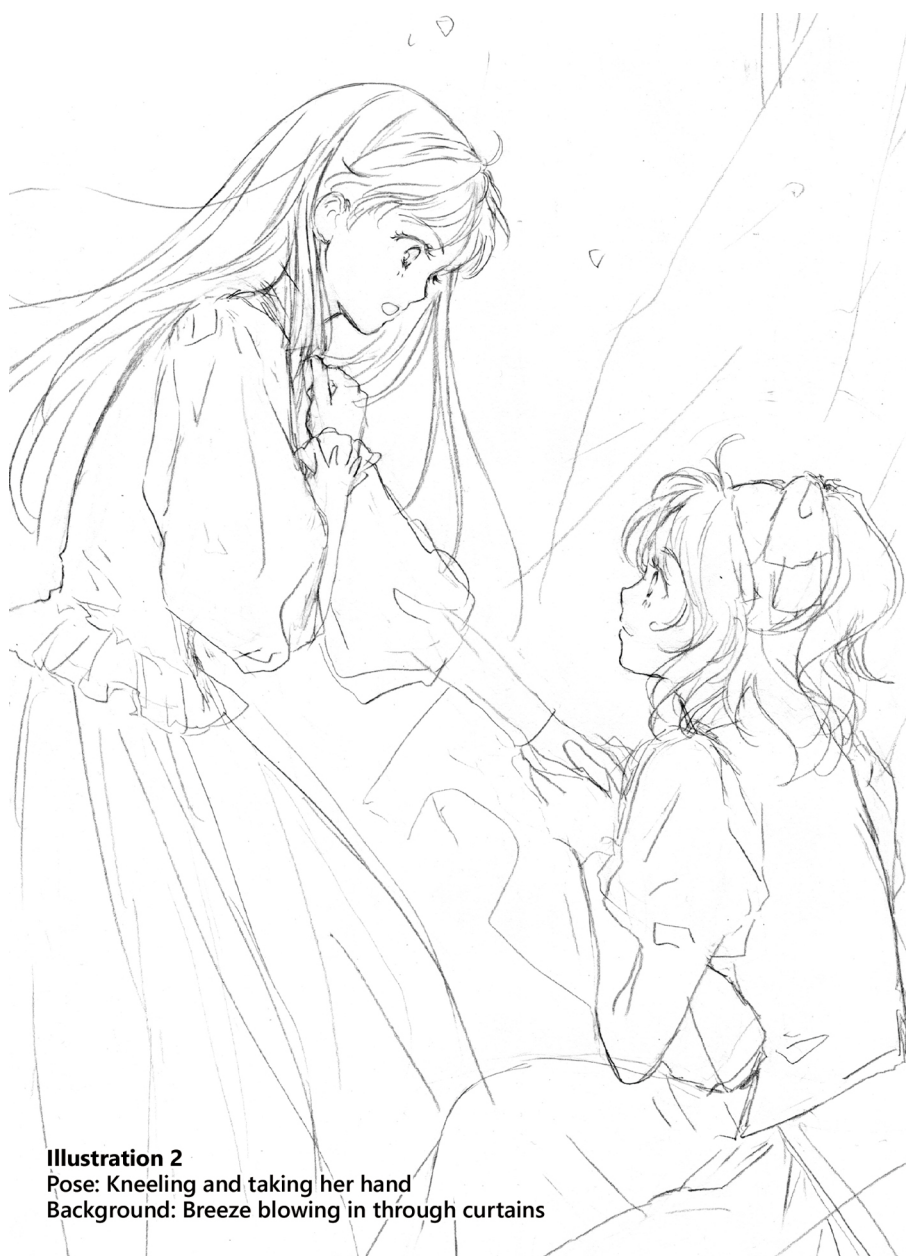


Illustration 2

Pose: Kneeling and taking her hand

Background: Breeze blowing in through curtains



Illustration 3

"We've got a lively one!" says Shan Li
Miyako-chan is taken aback & Fuuka-sama turns up!



Illustration 4

Miyako loses herself imagining Fuuka-sama in a maid outfit
Hearts fly around in the background

Illustration 5

The lines gradually fade and disappear at the top and bottom
Background: Curtains billow, petals flutter around





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by Ameko Kaeruda

Translated by Tom Harris
Edited by Jennifer Sherman

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by Ainaka Publishing
(GL Novel)

This English edition is published by arrangement with Ainaka
Publishing (GL Novel), Tokyo
English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2020
Premium Ebook